Why Some
Dropped Out:
Challenges to
Church Growth

In any faith community, the "long trajectory of transforma-tion" after a convert's initial act of resolve is often a difficult journey fraught with progress and pitfalls, successes and set-backs.[1] A fundamental reality emerges: it is one thing for con-verts to make commitments and embrace a new faith, but it is quite another to maintain their resolve and affiliation as they confront the consequences of their choice and the dilemmas of daily life.

Every religious community experiences some degree of attrition in commitment and participation among its mem-bership. Various studies have documented the fact that while missionary enterprises may yield new recruits, they struggle—over time and for a variety of reasons—to retain a significant

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1. Rambo and Farhadian, "Converting: Stages of Religious Change," 32.

number of these individuals as active participants.[2] Recruitment of converts, in other words, is only the first part of the formula for real church growth; retention of converts is equally vital in sustaining church viability in the long run. Long-term conversion turns out to be, for many initiates, a tenuous proposition.

The retention rate in Italian Latter-day Saint congregations is consistent with the churchwide average of 25–30 percent, and a variety of factors influence the decision of converts to remain active or to drop out. A common theme among Italian members is that retention of converts constitutes a persistent challenge to the church which, if addressed properly, could increase the size and profile of the church in Italy. Such observations suggest that there are factors that impact members' decisions about whether and to what degree to remain actively involved in the church after baptism.

Interviews, personal observation, and published research over a fifty-year period shed light on some general trends in convert retention and why a large percentage of Italian converts struggled to adapt to and remain active in the LDS Church. The specific examples and challenges we identify in this chapter represent various time periods, regional cultures, church units, and individual converts. Therefore, they do not—indeed cannot—characterize the experience of every person, place, and era in this long trajectory of growth and change. In addition, while identifying general retention issues in the Italian context, we recognize that these trends are not necessarily typical of only the Italian context. Most, if not all, can be found in other sociocultural settings and in

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2. See, for example, Stark and Finke, "Religious Choices: Conversion and Reaffiliation," in *Acts of Faith*, 114–38; Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation,* 1667–92; Wilfried Decoo, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 97–118; Decoo, "In Search of Mormon Identity: Mormon Culture, Gospel Culture, and an American Worldwide Church," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 6 (2013): 1–53; Decoo, "Mormons in Europe," in *The Oxford Handbook to Mormonism*, ed. Philip Barlow and Terryl Givens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jiro Numano, "Perseverance amid Paradox: The Struggle of the LDS Church in Japan Today," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 39, no. 4 (2006): 138–55; Howard M. Bahr and Stan L. Albrecht, "Strangers Once More: Patterns of Disaffiliation from Mormonism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 2 (1989): 180–200.

emerging congregations throughout the church. Finally, while our research included a broad cross-section of Italian Mormons, it was not as comprehensive as we desired because only the church's in-house research division is permitted to conduct direct, formal membership surveys. That said, we hope that our study of the root causes of disaffection and disaffiliation in Mormon congregations will be a useful addition to the small body of published literature on this important topic.

The Question of Real Growth

In recent years, issues surrounding rates of growth and retention in the LDS church have been a source of debate. Various research-ers have challenged the validity of church reports that show high annual rates of conversion and a burgeoning worldwide mem-bership (about fifteen million in 2015). They argue that these sta-tistics do not take into account the high percentage of converts who no longer participate on a regular basis—about 70 percent worldwide—and therefore distort the church's real growth. Stud-ies indicate that attendance at weekly sacrament meeting (the basis for determining retention rates) varies markedly from one geographic region to another. Figures reported in 1992 estimated retention rates at 25 percent in Asia and Latin America, 35 percent in Europe, and 40–50 percent in the United States and Canada, and more recent studies have placed the average retention rate at 25–35 percent churchwide and about 25 percent in Europe.[3] If the estimates are accurate, only about four to five million members out of the total fifteen million are actually sitting in the pews of Mormon chapels on a given Sunday around the world.[4]

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3. Tim B. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1527; David G. Stewart, *The Law of the Harvest: Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work* (Henderson, NV: Cumorah Foundation, 2007), 36–37; Decoo, "Issues in Writing European History and in Building the Church in Europe," 164.

4. Kristen Moulton, "LDS Membership Growth Stable; Slight Improvement Predicted for Convert Retention," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 March 2011, http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/lifestyle/51497153-80/church-growth-says-martinich.html.csp; Peter Henderson and Kristina Cooke, "Special Report: Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age," *Reuters*,

Other indicators of retention problems in the church include national census data that show wide gaps between reported church membership in various countries and citizens who identify themselves as Mormons,[5] and a slowdown since the 1980s in creating stakes—an important benchmark of church strength—despite high conversion rates.[6] According to one researcher, the disparity between reported membership figures and actual rates of activity and retention begs the question of what real growth is: "When individuals are baptized but do not attend church, do not identify themselves as Church members, and do not believe or live the teachings of the Church, . . . [and] when so few converts become participating members that durable new Church units cannot be organized and some existing units are collapsed because of the loss of previously active members, has the Church grown?" Another approach would be to "measure, report, and discuss Church growth in terms of active, faithful, and participating members and focus on building strong, vibrant units, rather than lauding paper membership increases that do not reflect true strength and commitment."[7]

Church officials have defended the LDS strategy for reporting growth rates but have also acknowledged that problems exist and have undertaken efforts to address them. Church spokespersons regularly noted that all religions experience some degree of defection and that, in publishing its membership reports, the church does not "make claims to be the fastest-growing Christian faith," nor does it publish comparisons of growth to other religions "because membership statistics are prepared and reported differ-

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30 January 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/30/us-mormonchurch-idUS TRE80T1CM20120130.

5. Phillips, "Rethinking the International Expansion of Mormonism," 52–68; David Clark Knowlton, "How Many Members Are There Really? Two Censuses and the Meaning of LDS Membership in Chile and Mexico," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 53–78.

6. Lowell C. "Ben" Bennion and Lawrence Young, "The Uncertain Dynamics of LDS Expansion, 1950–2020," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 28; Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, "Membership Growth, Church Activity, and Missionary Recruitment," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 48–52.

7. Stewart, *The Law of the Harvest*, 56, 59.

ently by various religious groups." In contrast to some journalists and LDS authors and bloggers, leaders tended to avoid hyperbole in discussing church growth, speaking of steady rates of increase "as indicated by the need to build more chapels and temples to accommodate membership" and of the church's interest in individuals, not numbers.[8] "Ultimately, the strength of the Church is really measured by the devotion and commitment of its members," observed a senior church leader. "The Lord has never given us the mandate to be the biggest Church—in fact, He has said our numbers will be comparatively few."[9] Church reports reflect total membership—both converts and births of record, whether fully, partially, or nonobservant—because of scriptural injunctions to remember and nourish church members (Moroni 6:4) and because experience and research show that individual participation rates and levels of commitment fluctuate over time. Only 22 percent remain active their entire lives, while nearly half (44 percent) go through periods of inactivity and then resume their church involvement, according to one study.[10]

General Authorities spoke frequently and publicly about the challenges of convert retention and the contributing factors. President Gordon B. Hinckley made this a prominent theme beginning in the late 1990s, urging the faithful to give equal effort both to baptizing and to retaining new converts: "Having found and baptized a new convert, we have the challenge of fellowshipping him and strengthening his testimony of the truth of this work. We

8. Electa Draper, "LDS Scholars: Mormon Moment Could Expand into Cultural Shift," *Denver Post*, 26 December 2012, http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_22247809/lds-scholars-mormon-moment-could-expand-into-cultural; Peggy Fletcher Stack, "Keeping Members a Challenge for LDS Church," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 26 July 2005, http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=2890645&itype=NGPSID; Stephanie Long, "News of the Church," *Ensign*, June 2007, 75–80.

9. M. Russell Ballard, quoted in Long, "News of the Church," *Ensign*, June 2007, 76.

10. Heaton, "Vital Statistics," 1527. Some studies have concluded, however, that this spectrum of activity primarily characterizes the Church in the United States, where social networks are stronger for members: "Through publications, interviews, and blogs, 'marginal' American Mormons now try to claim their place in a more diverse Mormonism. Elsewhere, nearly all 'inactive' members are really and permanently 'out,' as analysis confirms." Wilfried Decoo, "Sacrifice and Retention: An Unsolvable Dilemma?" *Times and Seasons*, 1 May 2012, http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2012/05/sacrifice-and-retention-an-unsolvable-dilemma/.

cannot have him walking in the front door and out the back."[11] In 1999, during a satellite broadcast on conversion and retention, Elder M. Russell Ballard, an apostle, stressed the importance of "real growth" over statistical growth: "You cannot establish the church in your own area unless you produce real growth—that is, not just growth on paper or in the number of membership records in your ward or stake. Real growth entails increasing the number of participating, dedicated Latter-day Saints." [12]

The following year, Elder Dallin H. Oaks reiterated the same theme, reminding mission presidents that "a distressing proportion" of converts drop out, with the sharpest attrition occurring in the first two months after baptism. Acknowledging that "we have not yet significantly increased our effectiveness" in retaining new converts, he cited two factors as vital in rectifying the problem: (1) member involvement in proselytizing and fellowshipping (investigators are ten times more likely to be baptized when they know a member well), and (2) support for investigators and new members in their struggle to overcome addictions (one-third to one-half of whom reported lapses in their observance of the Word of Wisdom after baptism).[13]

Mormon scholars have studied the challenges of international church growth and suggested possible adaptations that could be made to reduce attrition and to strike a better balance between the need for both organizational unity and local diversity.[14] Their work highlights many of the same issues and findings that surfaced

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11. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Find the Lambs, Feed the Sheep," *Ensign*, May 1999, 104–7; see also *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 213–14.

12. M. Russell Ballard, "Members Are the Key," *Ensign*, September 2000, 8–15.

13. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Role of Members in Conversion," *Ensign*, March 2003, 52–58.

14. On conversion/retention issues in Europe, see, for example, Walter E. A. van Beek, "Ethnization and Accommodation: Dutch Mormons in Twenty-first Century Europe," *Dialogue* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 119–27; Euvrard, "Socio-Histoire du Mormonisme en France-Thèse de doctorat"; Decoo, "In Search of Mormon Identity"; Decoo, "Mormons in Europe"; Decoo, "Sacrifice and Retention: An Unsolvable Dilemma?"; and Armand L. Mauss, "Can There Be a 'Second Harvest'?: Controlling the Costs of Latter-day Saint Membership in Europe," *British Journal of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 1–63.

in our research on Italy: costs of conversion and membership—social, emotional, and financial—that are higher in many ways for European members than for North American members; norms and traditions of local culture that clash with church imperatives; teaching curricula that lack relevance to real-world problems and issues of importance in Europe; strict adherence to some principles—such as Sunday observance and dress and grooming standards—that tend to isolate European members from their families and communities; and aspects of church administration that are overly complex and difficult to manage in newer, struggling units. Several studies have shown that levels of convert retention tend to be lowest in countries with historically high conversion rates (e.g., Chile, Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines), pointing to weaknesses in the overall proselytizing strategy that we also observed: pressure on missionaries to achieve numerical goals, superficial preparation of potential converts, rushed baptisms, and poor coordination between members and missionaries in helping converts integrate into their new community.[15]

Internal Challenges: Administration, Teaching, and Socialization

Our research identified subtle tensions and fault lines within the church's culture and structure that weakened the foundations of growth in Italy. These included the impact of an unfamiliar American-style organizational ethos, the viability of official retention programs, the quality of curricula and teaching, and problems resulting from inadequate collaboration between missionaries and members.

Impact of administrative complexity on member morale. Many Italian church members noted one issue in particular that has proven to be a persistent thorn in their side: the American style of administering church affairs. The origin and impact of the church's correlation program—rooted in the American corporate ethos of goal setting, statistical reporting, and accountability—presented

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15. Phillips, "Rethinking the International Expansion of Mormonism," 53–58; Stewart, *The Law of the Harvest*, 55.

challenges to many local leaders, who chafed at the administrative tasks required of them, viewing them as too complicated, numbers-based, and time-consuming.

While motivated to serve faithfully and to sacrifice personal time for the greater good, leaders frequently expressed frustration that "secondary" administrative tasks overwhelmed their "primary"—and more fulfilling—pastoral role of nurturing the flock and spending time with family. An experienced male church leader commented that "we need fewer meetings and administrative burdens, more time for family, less formality, more simplicity, more depth of opportunity for culture, history, reflection. We are too dedicated to numbers and organization." A female church leader noted that administrative complexity contributes to the high rate of defection among converts: "Some converts fall away because they become tired or burned out by the high level of commitment required. Church activity involves the whole week. People like my husband, who was branch president seven times, tire out because they can't do everything, and so they quit coming."

Longtime church members spoke passionately and insightfully about their desire for changes that would shift more decision-making authority to the local level and allow them to focus on the all-important, but often marginalized, pastoral dimensions of religious life:

> Big [church] organization doesn't work well here in Italy. There are many discussions at higher levels of church administration that affect us but don't include us. Seventy percent of our time as church leaders is administrative, not pastoral. Paper work consumes too much time. We can't make it work—it takes time from things that really count, like visiting and helping people.

> We hope for organizational change—more simplicity, a slower pace, allowing more time for family and missionary work. Administrative tasks consume too much time—the system doesn't fit our culture. There are so many papers to fill out. Papers, papers, papers! Maybe this works where there are many members who can divide the work, but here in the frontier of the church, it is too much.

> The organization is too centralized in Salt Lake—the mission and area leaders lack power to bring about real change. They have to clear just about everything at central headquarters. We hope to return more to simple gospel values, without so many administrative burdens. We have the sensation at times that the leaders in Salt Lake City are not aware of how these bureaucratic procedures affect our little branches and wards in the outlying areas.

The foregoing observations evince a conflicted tone that is symptomatic of why some Italian members and lay leaders eventually drift away from the church, even after years of earnest belief and committed service. The expectations and demands are high; the amount of administrative minutia is burdensome; a high rate of exasperation and burnout is inevitable. Studies of retention among Latter-day Saints corroborate the fact that the pressure of heavy pastoral burdens, work demands, and family obligations takes a toll on lay church leaders outside of Italy as well.[16]

Constraints in church retention programs. A cornerstone of the LDS system for retaining converts and bolstering activity rates is home teaching. As practiced today, two home teachers, consisting of two men, are assigned to visit several individuals or families in their homes at least once each month, inquire about their well-being, impart a spiritual message, and then report the outcome of their visits to priesthood leaders who help arrange any necessary assistance. A parallel program, called visiting teaching, operates in a similar fashion among the women of the church. The overall goal of these programs is to help every member stay connected by providing friendship, encouragement, and spiritual and temporal support on a regular basis beyond the normal Sunday meetings. They are intended to increase retention rates by reinforcing communal and familial relationships and helping converts sustain long-term commitments after baptism.

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16. Numano, "Mormonism in Modern Japan," 226, 233; John P. Hoffmann and Charlie V. Morgan, "Japanese Members of the LDS Church: A Qualitative View," in *Taking the Gospel to the Japanese, 1901 to 2001*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Van C. Gessel (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2006), 402–20; and Decoo, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock," 100–101, 109.

Interview data from Italy indicate that such benefits have accrued in some families and church units but that, overall, a number of social, cultural, and ecclesiastical forces have impaired the effectiveness of home teaching and thus weakened the church's capacity to retain converts. Indicative of this problem is the comment of a mission president who reported that "when we arrived [in Italy], the Italian members told us, 'We don't do home teaching here. We tried it before, and it was a fiasco.'" Interviews revealed that there were members who had not received a home visit for many years and that, in some cases, this failure to reinforce friendship and emotional support outside of formal meetings led converts to drop out.

Some church leaders in Italy estimated the percentage of monthly participation in home teaching at less than 20 percent, and in an attempt to understand these low rates, cited as a challenge the way that Italian society structures work and school time during the week. The one-day weekend in Italy—essentially Sunday only—for family activities and church meetings leaves little time or energy for home teachers to make the required monthly visits to the homes of church members assigned to them:

> People work until 12:30, then take a break at home until 3:30 or so, and then return to work until 7:00 or 8:00 in the evening. So there is no time in the evenings or during the day for church work, home teaching, and other duties. Even Saturdays are not free because public schools are in session and people work. Sunday is the only truly free day in the week, and that's the day Italian members see as the day to do church and family things. Home teaching, therefore, has been a big problem in the wards and branches. The percentages are very low: maybe 10 to 15 percent.

This problem is exacerbated when home teachers must travel a considerable distance to neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas or to outlying towns and remote villages, often involving daunting time commitments and transportation costs (for low-income family budgets already stretched thin). Because of these constraints, many stalwart members choose to spend their time each Sunday in family and church participation. Thus home

teaching gradually migrates to the margins of Latter-day Saint life, and its impact on communal cohesion and convert retention greatly diminishes.

Some dimensions of home teaching, while appropriate for the American context in which they originate, encounter cultural undercurrents in Italy that hamper members' efforts to carry out these programs effectively. As in some other European countries, home visits to people outside one's circle of close family and friends are not as common as in the United States and, when done, follow relatively formal and traditional norms. A monthly home visit by two assigned outsiders—even if from the same congregation—is not customary, and building trust can therefore take time.[17] Interview data reflect concerns frequently expressed about respecting others' privacy at home and maintaining a certain reserve in relationships outside of close associates. A church leader, commenting about why home teaching in Italy is sometimes challenging, noted, "Northern Italian culture says don't bother other people in their homes, especially inactives." Finally, the central role of the extended Italian family in meeting temporal and spiritual needs emerged as a factor that sometimes works against church programs intended to bolster convert retention. Another member observed that "when home teaching functions, it works well and is a great blessing. But in Italy most of our support comes from individual and family relationships."

Relevance of curricula and quality of teaching. Italian members pointed to cultural discrepancies in church manuals that sometimes sparked disagreements and tensions. The core issue is that information presented in official curriculum materials of the church is considered sacrosanct by many members. Newer converts, unable to readily distinguish between "eternal essentials" and "temporary trappings," and inexperienced teachers often feel obliged to teach lessons exactly as outlined in the manuals and are reluctant to deviate from the printed material or to add personal insights or interpretation to the literal reading of the text. To

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17. See Decoo, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock," 113, on home-teaching challenges in Europe and why visits are sometimes viewed as invasions of privacy.

make matters even more difficult, church manuals tended toward authoritative language that discouraged innovative teaching and sometimes contained doctrinal and cultural instruction that did not accurately explain what was and was not official church teaching.

For example, several leaders reported that conflicts arose among Italian members about the question of the origin of life on earth. Specifically, does the theory of evolution conflict with the Christian doctrine of creation? Can we trust the findings of science about the accuracy of the fossil record and the existence of dinosaurs? Did humans evolve from lower forms of life? This issue is of course not unique to Latter-day Saints: Christians of many denominations continue to debate whether the Bible can be interpreted to reconcile evolution with creationism. An extensive body of literature on this question in LDS theology exists, documenting how senior church leaders have differed in their opinions over the years and showing that church officials have opted to leave this point of doctrine in the "open-ended" category (i.e., withholding any definitive pronouncement setting forth an official church position).[18]

In Italy, the church manual used for teaching the Old Testament in Seminaries and Institutes was a translation of a manual that focused on the writings of conservative Mormon leaders who opposed Darwin's theory of evolution. The manual failed to balance the presentation by citing the writings of moderate church authorities who have sought to find harmony between science and religion on this question. The ensuing debates on this issue among members aroused tension and continued to be a source of discord.

Members revealed other significant points of tension in curricular materials that have at times created discontentment and even disaffection among Italian members. An oft-cited issue deals with dress and grooming standards prescribed for youth. One

18. See, for example, Morris Petersen, "Fossils and Scripture," *Ensign*, September 1987, 28; William E. Evenson and Duane E. Jeffery, *Mormonism and Evolution: The Authoritative LDS Statements* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2005); and David H. Bailey, "Science and Mormonism: Past, Present, and Future," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 80–96.

church leader, reflecting broader sentiment, questioned whether these guidelines were doctrinal truths or merely cultural trappings: "Clothing styles are a banal issue. The church tells the young men to wear ties and white shirts, which causes problems for our young men. Does the Lord really care what color my shirt is? The same for long hair and earrings—exterior things that are common here among Italian youth. We should have more patience about these less important things." The problem is compounded by some members, who take it upon themselves to be dress-and-grooming police, bluntly informing young people, new converts, and even investigators when their style of dress and hair do not coincide with church tradition, often causing deep offense.

Another flashpoint was teachings in early manuals that promoted a rigid view of male and female roles in marriage and took little account of the evolving nature of families and economic realities in modern Italian society. A typical lament points to the angst created among members struggling to make ends meet: "Some teaching materials and manuals tell women not to work outside the home, but here in Italy, both husband and wife have to work to support our families. Having large families, as suggested in some talks and lessons, is not possible here." Some of the concerns expressed by Italians about LDS family and gender role expectations were placated somewhat with the publication in 1995 of "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," an official declaration that allows married couples flexibility based on family circumstances and spiritual guidance, in deciding the specific roles of husband and wife, questions about family size, and who should work outside the home.

In addition to challenges related to the content of curriculum materials, an issue of deep concern was the quality of teaching in church meetings. A significant number of converts pointed out that the members were ill prepared to assume one of the most important but difficult duties of a lay clergy—providing doctrinal instruction that is engaging, relevant, and stimulating to the congregants. The fundamental problem was that new converts, coming mostly from religious traditions that featured a professional clergy and a more passive style of member participation in church

services, had little experience in lay leadership and were unaccustomed to teaching organized lessons and giving prepared sermons in public. One church member explained the problem in terms of the differences between lay and professional models of leadership: "The lay leadership in the LDS Church is a problem sometimes because converts expect trained, professional leadership skills: better prepared, better sermons, more time spent in helping them like their full-time Catholic priests did." If the teaching and preaching are dogmatic, repetitive, irrelevant, or otherwise spiritually and intellectually unsatisfying, interest in attending services begins to wane.

Many Italian Latter-day Saint converts cited this factor—meetings and instruction that are "long" or "tiring" or "unfulfilling"—as a reason for low conversion and retention rates. There have been attempts to address these problems by offering regular teacher and leadership training, which has helped alleviate the problem somewhat. But with the high turnover in church positions and uneven attendance at training sessions, the concerns about poor quality of instruction and its impact on church growth still persist. It appears, then, that along with the benefits of a democratic, participatory ethos that attracts converts, the costs of a lay membership and leadership who sometimes lack the expertise and training necessary to motivate, inspire, and retain converts over the long term must also be taken into account.

These debates over doctrinal issues, gender roles, dress standards, and the quality of meetings and instruction also occur in other LDS congregations and cause similar conflicts regardless of the particular culture involved. The point to be made concerns an important aspect of church growth, in Italy and elsewhere: the distinction between a first- or second-generation church and an eighth- or ninth-generation church. The dynamics, resources, and challenges of newly emerging units are substantially different from those of older, well-established units. An experienced church leader and careful observer of Mormon life stated that the question is less about culture per se and more about

how members react to these tensions from their (im)maturity and (in)experience in the church, and their (in)ability to put the tensions aside or in perspective. In regions where the church is young—with more converts, more unbalanced personalities among converts, and more converts who are poorly educated—the issues will create more vocal waves and emotional reactions. In more mature wards, with more balanced and seasoned members, the same issues exist but most people have learned to avoid public criticism and open conflicts.

He wryly added that a disadvantage of mature church units is that, because they are more unified, they tend to be less lively and interesting than emerging congregations.[19]

Dealing with doubt. Our research found that easy access to anti-Mormon literature on the Internet and lack of well-designed, informative LDS websites to provide a counterbalance impaired conversion and retention rates. Beginning about the year 2000, members and investigators increasingly went online—rather than to missionaries, church leaders, or official church sources—for further information about church history, doctrine, and practice. In many cases, what they found online raised questions and sowed doubts that eroded the foundation of their relationship with the Mormon community. To cite just one of many examples in Italy, a stake president reported that a bishop in a large ward, after reading extensive online literature that challenged official LDS versions of church history and doctrine, confided that his faith in Mormonism had been shaken. The bishop had also shared his misgivings with his immediate family and large extended family, all of whom were longtime, active members. Some of them eventually left the church, which created a deep crisis of faith that rippled throughout the entire ward and stake.

In recent years, the church has taken some steps to acknowledge this problem and address these issues more directly. A series of nuanced, provocative essays on polygamy, race relations, religious violence, the nature of LDS scripture, and other thorny topics have been posted on the church's official website, lds.org.

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19. Wilfried Decoo to James Toronto, Email, 3 November 2012.

Church historian Marlin K. Jensen also publicly cited problems with handling controversy and doubt as major reasons for convert defection. He attributed membership losses in the past ten years, especially among young people, to growing secularization in society, teaching materials that are "severely outdated," and the inadequacy of the church's effort to deal with controversial doctrinal and historical issues that gained notoriety with the advent of the Internet.[20] In the opinion of the journalist who reported the story, Jensen had put his finger on a vital issue in contemporary religious life—doubt—which is "perhaps the largest challenge not only to Mormonism, but also to modern organized religion as a whole."[21] Despite these problems, Elder Jensen argued that Mormonism remained a vibrant faith community, opining that "we are at a time of challenge, but it isn't apocalyptic."[22]

Challenges in the conversion and socialization process. A major issue surrounding low retention of converts deals with how missionaries and members collaborate in preparing investigators for baptism and in fellowshipping them once they join the church. Consistently, interviewees identified issues in the conversion process that led to hasty, premature baptisms and to weak social support for converts after baptism—two key factors that led to high dropout rates.

Church members identified problems that arose as a natural consequence of the Italianization of leadership in the 1970s and 1980s. One result was increasing distance and less communication between members and missionaries. Early missionaries "had a strong bond with the members," according to one member, but after about the mid-70s "a strong detachment [*forte distacco*]" developed. From that time on, said another informant, missionaries were "not as involved in the lives of the members and investigators." This growing detachment of missionaries and changes in their discussions led to a style of teaching investigators that

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20. Michelle Boorstein, "Struggling Mormons Find Online Support," *Washington Post*, republished in *Daily Herald*, 26 May 2012, A1–2; Henderson and Cooke, "Special Report: Mormonism Besieged by the Modern Age."

21. Boorstein, "Struggling Mormons Find Online Support," A2.

22. Henderson and Cooke, "Special Report."

became less attuned to issues unique to Italian life, as pointed out in the following three observations: "The missionary discussions have been improved and simplified, but impoverished in some ways." "Missionaries don't seem to exhibit a cultural preparation at all." "Now the missionaries teach, but they need to adapt to our local ways—our way of thinking, doing, seeing the world." Local members expressed concern about missionaries' overzealous pursuit of mission baptismal goals, which included making rash predictions about growth and rushing to convert individuals who were ill-prepared for long-term church commitments. Over the years, members became "disenchanted with promises of lots of baptisms" that never materialized. In sum, a church leader observed, "the competitive style of missionary work doesn't go well here in Italy."

Tensions sometimes arose between missionaries and local Italian members over the question of converts' preparation and readiness for church membership. Young missionaries (who were always conscious of mission baptismal goals and whose long hours of proselytizing normally yield few teaching opportunities and even fewer serious candidates for baptism) were prone to take a more lenient stance in assessing the readiness and commitment of their investigators. The Italian members, on the other hand—jaded by years of dealing with a revolving door of new missionaries and new converts who come, stay a while, and leave—advocated a more stringent approach to preparing people for baptism. They wanted to take more time in the teaching process, even several months or years if necessary. Allow investigators more opportunities to attend church meetings, replace harmful habits with more wholesome ones, form strong relationships with the members, and acquire a deeper understanding of the benefits and expectations of membership. Let the investigators indicate when they are ready to convert, rather than constantly prodding and pressuring them to make a decision. In the words of one interviewee, "Converts who stay in the church understand that this is a new style of life, of understanding. They are touched by the Spirit. True conversions weren't quick conversions—they first overcame obstacles, attended church several months, and became integrated

before baptism. The competitive system of achieving baptismal results doesn't work any more."

An ongoing process of socialization of converts after baptism was another key factor in retention. Problems of disaffection, we found, could be traced in some cases to inadequate effort to provide social support to investigators and converts and help them make the difficult transition to an unfamiliar new belief system and social network. At times, as one less-active member noted, strained relations with members drove converts away: "I had no problems with the commandments. Some doctrines were hard to understand; some contradictions took me a while to grasp. But relations with church members have been a test for me at times. Not all church members are angels." The comment of an experienced church leader was a familiar refrain in the interview data: "The activity rate is 30–40 percent in the Padova Mission [1996]. Why do 60 percent go inactive? If converts are fellowshipped, made to feel loved and needed, given a calling to serve, they don't usually go inactive. But too many members are cliquish, hold grudges, and don't reach out to new members."

With regard to long-term convert retention, belonging often trumps believing, as demonstrated by the story told by a young couple who had been happily serving as leaders in their small branch. The wife had joined the church as a teenager and the husband had accepted baptism during his college years after an intensely spiritual experience reading the Book of Mormon. He was extremely bright and inquisitive and enjoyed discussing philosophy, theology, and politics. Occasionally, he expressed concern about some points of LDS doctrine, and he regretted—as the only member of his family who had converted—the opposition he felt from his parents and siblings. But his testimony of the Book of Mormon and his wife's devotion remained solid and helped him overcome any doubts.

After several years, however, with the birth of several children and minimal growth in the congregation (consisting mostly of single teenagers and older women), the couple began to feel a deep need for association with other young couples who, like them, were struggling to raise children and make ends meet. Their

efforts to establish a new business in town met difficult obstacles, and the family began to experience some serious health problems. Their busy church callings became onerous in these circumstances, and the handful of branch members had little to offer in terms of emotional support or professional advice. The couple gradually became acquainted with other young families who were part of a vibrant Catholic association in the neighborhood, and found satisfying friendships both for themselves and for their children. After a few months, they discontinued their participation in the LDS branch and began attending the Catholic Church.

This example illustrates that while questions of doctrine and theology occupied center stage in the conversion process before baptism, issues of social acceptance and belonging became increasingly significant after baptism in determining long-term retention rates. In other words, many converts were attracted initially by the appeal of church teachings that promise a closer walk with God, eternal family bonds, exercise of spiritual gifts by all believers, and a more fulfilling role in church service and leadership. But over time, if these newly adopted beliefs, rituals, and roles were not accompanied by a rewarding sense of fellowship, support, and belonging, converts often returned to previous networks or sought other avenues of social fulfillment, regardless of the depth of their original convictions and core beliefs.

External Factors: Tensions between Local Culture and Mormonism

There are many instructive examples of how the overlapping and often clashing identities of cultural heritage and church membership can lead to discord and disaffection. Deeply embedded customs and traditions are difficult to evaluate objectively, and the process of determining what can be retained and what must be abandoned in order to assume a new religious identity fosters emotional turmoil and social conflict. These tensions can significantly degrade the strength of the church, particularly during the first and second generations of growth when local units are small and vulnerable.

One church leader in Italy, commenting on the lingering effects of Italian culture in Mormon religious life, observed:

> There is enormous conflict between LDS teachings and the modern Italian culture fostered by the media: for example, sexual mores are very liberal and promiscuous here. Use of drugs is becoming more widespread and acceptable. I remember the talk that Elder Scott gave some time ago about traditions impeding you as a member of the church, that whatever in our culture would keep us away from being a member of the church, that needs to go. . . . There are a lot of those things right now, little things that have crept in that cause people to change the church and put other things and all the traditions in front.

Thus, "little things" from local tradition exert subtle but significant influence and "cause people to change the church," adversely impacting conversion and retention rates. This problem, of course, is not unique to the Italian context, and the examples of cultural conflict discussed here can be found in one form or another throughout the international church.

Word of Wisdom observance. A major challenge to retention is the inability or unwillingness of some converts to observe the Mormon health code: the Word of Wisdom. Converts often continue to struggle in their effort to reconcile their new lifestyle with their cultural upbringing and to sustain the commitments made at baptism. Even though they may have been strongly attracted by other aspects of LDS belief and practice, converts who revert to old habits often drop out, sometimes because of the social opprobrium they feel from other church members. After an initial period of euphoria and enthusiasm following baptism, the spotlight gradually shifts away from the new convert as he or she begins to settle into the normal routine of religious life. Without the intensive support and daily contact with missionaries and members that characterize the prebaptism teaching process, some converts begin slowly to lapse back into more comfortable habits

and to forgo some church obligations for one reason or another, often due to social pressure from family, friends, and coworkers.[23]

For example, one young convert generously contributed his time and means to building the church and serving others. He married a young woman in his congregation who had been raised in a strong LDS family. He too came from a large, close-knit family, all devout Catholics, who initially opposed his conversion but eventually showed lukewarm tolerance of his new religion and wife. However, his extended family, like many Italian families, was steeped in the traditions of the *cultura del vino*. Often, family members would make fun of his teetotaling and question the religious and scientific rationale for abstaining from wine. The constant pressure to reconsider his new belief system and to respect time-honored family rituals became a major point of contention in the marriage and eventually took a heavy emotional toll. After several years, the man left the church and his wife because of the contradiction between his psyche, personal habits, and family customs and his commitment to Mormonism.

Style and quality of leadership. Issues of leadership at the local level, particularly in the early stages of church growth, are paramount in attracting and retaining converts, thereby creating viable new church congregations. In areas where there are leaders who exemplify Christian ideals of compassion, service, and humility and exhibit a nurturing, flexible disposition in addressing the myriad problems of a diverse flock, the church grows steadily. Conversely, where there is a shortage of such benevolent, competent leadership, growth stalls and retention rates plummet. Leadership, in other words, is central to church viability and sustainability in emerging areas like Italy, a fact that church leaders have long recognized and sought to address through identifying, training, and developing local leadership.

In a church comprising many lay leaders with little or no prior training and experience, Latter-day Saint converts naturally

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23. This is a major impediment to conversion and retention outside of Italy, too. One church official cited the problem of overcoming addictions as "an extremely important but widely neglected need of investigators and new members." Oaks, "The Role of Members in Conversion," 52–58.

adopted, as a default model, aspects of leadership that reflected their own personality, their experience growing up in the local culture, and human nature in general. For instance, there were challenges inherent in the transition from a Catholic style of worship, in which the focal point is the action of the priest who conducts the liturgy apart from and in behalf of the congregants, to an LDS model, in which a lay leader plays a somewhat more collaborative role overseeing a set of rituals in consort with the congregants. A history of more autocratic leadership in Italian politics may have also influenced the leadership ethos in early church units. One convert, echoing this theme, observed that, in some Mormon congregations, leadership centered in one man, as in the tradition of some Italian Catholic priests who "run the show and make the decisions. There is little concept of studying the issues, counseling with others, making suggestions, and bringing about change."

Church members noted that with the advent of the program in the 1970s promoting Italianization and deemphasizing the role of foreign missionaries, the nature and quality of church leadership temporarily took on a more authoritarian approach to ministry. Unilateral decision making became more evident than common consent and collaboration:

> I remember that during the early years of the church here in Italy, the LDS idea of priesthood was commonly misinterpreted. For many priesthood leaders, it meant that "I'm the head, so I command, I decide." Fathers would say, "God has given me the priesthood. I receive the inspiration for the family. Now they must do what I say. My wife and children must blindly obey." Priesthood wasn't understood in the true sense of the word that it must be a power that is based on love, understanding, and service.

At times, leaders showed a lack of discretion in dealing with sensitive matters and preferential treatment for family and friends that fostered ill will and disaffection within the church: "Sometimes Italian culture affects church relationships in negative ways: for example, leaders must learn to be impartial, even to friends—this is hard because of our Italian system of *clientelismo*: show-

ing favoritism to close friends and family. In one case recently, a branch president left the church because his disciplinary decision was overturned by the district president, who was close friends with the man being disciplined."

Even though Latter-day Saint scripture warns against the perils of abusing priesthood authority for personal aggrandizement and enjoins leaders to exercise power only with equanimity and compassion,[24] problems occasionally arose in emerging church units as the reality fell short of the ideal. Leadership sometimes devolved into a cult of personality, with loyalties and alliances of members arrayed for and against the presiding officer, and egos deeply invested in achieving and retaining church positions that were viewed as proprietary in nature. "Unrighteous dominion rather than common consent is a problem here in Italy," according to one member. "Some church leaders lead like Mussolini, and so young people don't give them trust. Some leaders want only power." Another observer noted that church officials sometimes "exhibit a part of Italian culture that I don't like–'to make oneself seen' [*farsi notare*]. Some leaders make a lot of beautiful speeches but not a lot of personal sacrifices." The results, in many cases, were devastating for fledgling Church units trying to survive. In one instance, a convert reported, "when the president of our branch was excommunicated a while ago, most of the branch members left with him. It has taken years to recover."

Some Italian converts also noted that Italianization of leadership changed the tone of personal and communal discourse during the first few decades of church growth. There was a subtle yet palpable shift toward a more stern approach in ministry, one that emphasized sin, guilt, and suffering rather than mercy, joy, and fulfillment.

> Italian leaders sometimes exhibit an attitude of preaching and reproving those present for their sins. We need to be loved and encouraged, not reproved and made to feel guilty.

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24. See Doctrine and Covenants 121:34–46.

> With Italian leaders . . . the gospel went from being something beautiful in all aspects of life to something more burdensome and an emphasis on suffering, guilt, and pain. Italian leaders make us feel guilty. We don't need preaching about our faults and shortcomings. We can choose what we need to do when we are taught the beauty of gospel principles.

Concurrent with these changes, a more inflexible, literalist approach to interpretation and application of scripture, doctrine, and policy began to take hold. According to several converts, these were troubling developments that fostered strife and distrust among members:

> Italian LDS leaders sometimes lacked vision; because of cultural reasons and style of leadership, they were too worried about secondary things. They were too rigid, bound by manuals and rules—focused on justice with little mercy.

> In Switzerland I had a beard and long hair in church, and when I went to the Salt Lake Temple I had no problem entering to do baptisms. But when I came to Italy I was told I must cut my hair and beard to receive the priesthood. Leaders in Italy sometimes are very conservative and rigid in their interpretations of church teachings and policies.

Two points regarding leadership style and retention of converts much be emphasized here. First, the challenges associated with leadership stemmed not only from the personal styles and cultural paradigms exhibited by local leaders, but also from issues in the mission and church organization related to identifying, training, and supervising local leaders. Sometimes in the push for Italianization, missionaries were removed from leadership positions and replaced with converts who were inexperienced and immature. New leaders often received only cursory training in complex church procedures and leadership tasks like marriage counseling, working with youth, communication, interpersonal relations, and conflict management. Senior leaders at church headquarters, including Elder Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, also lamented that church organization and

leadership style had become too regimented and programmed.[25] Second, these developments during the second mission in Italy were common in other emerging church units. It was also a time of transition, recalibration, and adjustment elsewhere in Europe as the church's missionary system was evolving internally while operating in a context of socioeconomic forces, similar to Italy's, that was in constant flux.[26]

As time passed and Italian members matured in their understanding and application of Latter-day Saint teachings about ministry, the quality of Italian leadership improved significantly. Many women and men developed exemplary leadership abilities, teaching skills, and personal traits. "Current Italian leadership is patient, flexible, kind, but also morally strong," one convert observed. "They love the youth." Many of these leaders, she continued, "are from the early period of church growth." An American mission president offered this assessment of Italian church leadership: "As church members, Italians are dedicated, intelligent, and capable in their service. . . . I was stunned after arriving in Italy by the leadership ability, strong work ethic, and good education of the church members. If all the American church leaders went home tomorrow, the church would be in good hands—the Italians would do just fine without us." Clearly, leadership evolved and improved, and yet issues surrounding quality and style of leadership continued to color the nature of the Italian church experience, contributing in both positive and negative ways to its uniqueness and shedding light on the challenges inherent in attracting and retaining converts.

Family bonds and loyalty: a double-edged sword. Italian society has long been characterized by its tightly knit family networks and patriarchal structure. Due to a state of nearly continual political and economic turmoil over the past several centuries, Italians have tended to place their trust in family and kinship ties rather

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25. Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 206.

26. See, for example, Dittberner, "One Hundred Eighteen Years of Attitude," 51–69. Wilfried Decoo described the situation of leadership, growth, and retention in Belgium as "identical" to that of Italy. Email to author, 1 September 2014.

than in unreliable, often foreign government authorities and institutions to find some semblance of security and stability in their lives. Paul Ginsborg has found that the changes wrought in Italian society during the "economic miracle" of the 1950s and '60s reinforced the strength of the family: "Indeed, the family became the basic unit for satisfying needs in contemporary Italy. Italy's modernization, as so many others, was not based on collective responsibility or collective action, but on the opportunities it afforded individual families to transform their lives."[27] Scholars term the kind of double morality that emerged in Italian society "amoral familism," meaning that one does "everything possible in legal ways, but if necessary resorting to means that are marginally legal, to maintain and protect one's own family."[28]

Many Italian converts cited the LDS Church's strong emphasis on the family as the basis for personal fulfillment and well-being as central to what attracted them to Mormonism. The focus on genealogy and temple work, designed to strengthen family units and bind them together for eternity, also has had special resonance for Italian converts who have especially high esteem for temples, where these family-focused activities are centered.

But many members also revealed that the influence of family values is a double-edged sword that cuts two ways, both facilitating and hindering church growth. "The family is very unified in Italy," explained one member, "and this is a plus and a minus for the LDS Church. It doesn't leave room for much freedom of action." The adverse impact of kinship loyalty on two of the church's main retention programs was explored earlier. Converts and church leaders cited numerous other examples of how the traditional family and patriarchal structure of Italian society represents a countervailing force that has prevented the conversion of many investigators and undermined the ongoing involvement of those who did convert. Even after baptism, many converts reported that family members who opposed their joining another church continued to exert pressure to recant, to avoid attending

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27. Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, 342.
28. Livolsi, *L'Italia Che Cambia*, 6.

meetings and activities, and to reconsider their "reckless" and "impetuous" decision to flout family loyalty in favor of embracing a "foreign" faith.

It was not uncommon for converts to receive an ultimatum from family members opposed to their flouting of patriarchal authority: "From when we chose to accept the gospel, my parents said, 'You and we will not have any more relationship.' And from that point on, our parents and siblings have never come to visit us." One astute observer provided a possible rationale: "The family is a strong institution here. However, the basic premises provided by the gospel of Jesus Christ are lacking in many families that are kept in line only by adherence to strong patriarchal authority in the real sense of the word. The patriarch commands like a dictator in many cases. Therefore, if this patriarch doesn't accept the church, he could prohibit his family members from accepting it. This is a problem for many in Italy." Another informant felt that many converts, if their conviction is strong, "can weather a lot of storms" in the conversion process. But even in families that joined the church together, when problems become "more of a family matter," the results can be devastating to church growth and retention. If the patriarch of the family "takes offense at something that may have started as a social thing, he is gone tomorrow, and he takes the whole family with him. We have here in [this branch] numerous families like this who are all gone, who went inactive together."

Persistence of Catholic religious culture. As suggested in the Rambo-Farhadian model of religious change, the transformation in lifestyle, thought, and behavior that converts experience is incremental in nature—not a once-and-for-all event—continuing well beyond baptism as they gradually learn to negotiate and adapt to uncharted religious waters. This implies that initiates do not shed their former spiritual persona immediately and completely; rather, they bring to the new encounter an array of deeply engrained attitudes, assumptions, and folkways that have heretofore provided meaning and direction in life. It is only natural, then, that during the ongoing transition from one religious

identity to another a certain amount of confusion and strain will arise as former habits collide with new imperatives.

The Italian experience is replete with examples that illustrate the dilemmas confronting both converts and Mormon officials as they struggle to sort through whether or not some aspects of Catholic tradition are congruent with LDS identity and worship. Thus, the persistence of Catholic culture in LDS life sometimes created conflict, adversely impacting convert retention and the cohesion of newly emerging church units.

Various church leaders spoke of the importance of local religious festivals and customs that play an integral role in Italian culture, reinforcing unity among families and communities and strengthening regional and national identity. In some cases, LDS converts continued to attend and participate in these Catholic-based observances either because they were unable or unwilling to distinguish the fine line between religion and culture, or more commonly, because they felt that the religious observance was spiritually harmless, socially and emotionally beneficial, and important to one's cultural identity and family relationships.

One church leader mentioned an active church member being observed downtown at a religious festival, praying in front of the statue of Padre Pio (a popular Catholic priest, since canonized and widely venerated in Italy).[29] He commented that perhaps some converts "are taking these customs as cultural things" but that there was also "a tendency not to have left behind old religious traditions." He also described an Italian church leader and his wife, baptized thirty years before, who still participated in the city's Easter festival when they brought the statues of Giovanni Battista and the Madonna into the square. "I don't know whether there's any spiritual significance, but they felt tied to it. It was very special to them."

These examples illustrate a fundamental feature of missionary outreach that is not unique to Italy. Throughout the international church, converts engage in a natural process of cultural negotiation to reconcile their roles in society with their new religious

29. Since his canonization in 2002, he is known as Saint Pio of Pietrelcina.

identity. Latin American Mormons, according to one study, con-
tinue to experience "significant social pressure" to participate
in Catholic rituals.[30] A study in Japan found that church mem-
bers generally did not consider their participation in traditional
Shinto, Buddhist, and Confucian rituals as religious behavior that
conflicted with Latter-day Saint practice. Indeed, "many Latter-
day Saints continued to participate in Japanese traditions even
after they had been members for many years"—it was their way of
showing friends and family "that it was possible to be a member
of an American religion and still remain Japanese."[31]

The early decades of church growth in Italy witnessed the
emergence of some heterodox teachings, rituals, and procedures
that could be traced to the lingering effects of Catholic religious
culture in the Mormon community. Although church authori-
ties publish a detailed handbook of instructions to promote uni-
formity of doctrine, ritual, and practice in communal worship,
church members commonly put their own stamp on these official
prescriptions, interpreting them in light of their cultural instincts
and religious upbringing. For former Catholics, accustomed to a
closely scripted, ceremonial form of liturgical worship centered
in the actions of the priest, exposure to the less formal style of
Mormon worship offered both opportunities and challenges.
Many converts found that the involvement of congregants in wor-
ship services—men, women, youth, and children—constituted a
refreshing departure from what they viewed as the stolidity of tra-
dition and afforded a new level of fulfillment through participa-
tion in giving sermons, administering the sacrament, performing
musical numbers, and other activities.

However, some Catholic attitudes and impulses inevitably
migrated into LDS practice, subtly shaping the dynamics of com-
munal rituals and relationships. Church members pointed out
anomalies in LDS procedure that reflect a certain tension between
the Catholic focus on preeminence of priestly action and the

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30. Knowlton, "How Many Members Are There Really?," 59.
31. Hoffmann and Morgan, "Japanese Members of the LDS Church: A Quali-
tative View," 413, 417.

Mormon ethos of participatory worship. In some church units, for example, members of the congregation were not allowed to handle the trays containing the sacralized emblems of bread and water during the central ritual of Sunday worship—the administration of the sacrament. Instead, only the young men of the Aaronic Priesthood could hold the trays, presenting them to each individual congregant rather than (according to more common practice) allowing each person to handle the tray, take the bread or water, and pass the tray down the row to the next person.

Some converts took offense at the comparatively boisterous, free-wheeling atmosphere that often reins inside LDS chapels, creating contention with other converts who enjoyed the more casual, spontaneous approach to worship. One long-time church member described, with obvious angst, the resulting problem: "Comings and goings during the church service. In and out. Up and down. [Members] don't hesitate to get up, go talk to a brother over here, a sister over there. . . . [Some] go out for a few minutes, come back in, sit back up at the front, which they don't need to do." Others noted that a balanced approach to maintaining a reverent atmosphere was needed, one that shows tolerance for differing views and behavior. These comments reflect the complex and often contentious dynamic that characterizes the ongoing effort to blend an inherited cultural identity with an emerging LDS identity among converts.

Transition to a high-demand religion. The prevalent style of worship in Italy that contrasts with the expectations and norms of Latter-day Saint religious life also emerged as a factor that influences retention rates. Some aspects of Catholic culture (e.g., its deeply rooted religious customs and attitudes, hierarchical style of church leadership, and less participatory model of worship) naturally migrate with converts to the LDS community, shaping the delicate interplay of relationships, roles, and expectations among members and influencing levels of participation and satisfaction.

Both prospective converts and new converts have sometimes found it difficult to embrace and maintain the LDS style of affiliation that involves a high cost in terms of personal time, means,

and behavioral change.[32] The LDS lifestyle—involving (among other things) attendance at meetings several times weekly, a 10 percent tithe on annual income, abstinence from alcohol, coffee, tea, and tobacco, and fellowshipping visits to the homes of other members—represents a difficult transformation for many Italians.

Earl and Violet Wilson arrived in Taranto in 1969 as the first senior couple in the mission, and he presided over four branches in the Puglia district. They observed that missionary work was "very discouraging at first." Converts at the time often struggled to adapt their lives to "the church's ways and standards [that] are so different than what they were used to." For example, the requirement to attend religious services every Sunday as well as other meetings during the week was not always viewed as a high priority, especially if they conflicted with family plans on the weekend. According to Wilson, other duties of LDS membership like accepting a leadership position or giving a sermon in front of the congregation were unfamiliar and uncomfortable for some Italian converts: "People would come to church, and the elders would ask them to say a prayer, but they didn't want to. They wanted the elders to do everything while they just sat and didn't participate. . . . They were used to going to mass and sitting for an hour then going home." But, they added, "all these things changed for the better in due time."[33]

In the estimation of many Mormon converts, a high-demand religion is alien to Italian experience: "There are too many sacrifices in the church for most Italians," one church leader opined. Another member pointed to the prevailing religious tradition that "teaches people to sit and listen passively, not be actively engaged" as a major stumbling block to Mormon growth. Another shared his theory that, because of their Catholic background, "Italians are used to a religion that asks very little of them—only to attend mass on Sunday," whereas the LDS Church "asks a lot, but gives a

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32. Armand Mauss points out that the costs are greater in many ways for European converts than for members in the United States. See Mauss, "Can There Be a 'Second Harvest'?"

33. Earl and Violet Wilson interview, 7 September 1978, MS 2735 293, Church History Library.

lot in return"—an aspect of Mormonism that attracts some converts. In a historically homogeneous religious culture that "makes salvation easy," requirements like the Word of Wisdom or paying tithing scare away many potential converts. An LDS family talked about "close friends who are not members of the church but who have come to meetings several times. They consider our principles to be good and correct. But it is the commitment required by the church that frightens them and keeps them from joining."

The reality of Catholic political influence and religious culture, in addition to other issues in the conversion process such as the relative merits of new religious doctrines and the often difficult transition from one social network to another, helps explain why the vast majority of those who investigate the Church choose not to be baptized and why two-thirds of those who do convert are unable or unwilling to sustain this high level of religious commitment over the long term.

Conversion and Retention among Italian Converts

This research among Italian Mormons illustrates the complex nature of conversion and retention—the interplay of personal proclivities, spiritual and temporal motives, social pressures, and institutional strengths and weaknesses that influence church growth over time. Mormonism appealed to spiritual seekers who were experiencing inner turmoil and crises of various kinds—Italians who were dissatisfied with traditional religion, searching for moral clarity during periods of social upheaval, or seeking alternative paths to fulfillment. Many flouted social stigmas, endured opprobrium, and made difficult lifestyle adjustments to embrace a "foreign" religion, because they were impressed by Latter-day Saint teachings about the personal nature of God, the meaning of existence, the focus on creating strong bonds of friendship and family, and the opportunity for self-improvement through service and lay leadership. The minority of converts—one out of three—who stayed actively involved in the church assessed the tensions created by their conversion and concluded that the benefits of church membership outweighed the social costs. Factors such as

deep personal conviction about the efficacy of Mormon teachings, the warmth and support of the new religious community, an ability to preserve good relations with family and friends over time, and Italy's increasingly tolerant religious milieu—all contributed over time to their capacity to adapt successfully to the challenges of a new religious community and to adopt a new religious identity that shaped their lives and worldviews in profound ways.

Another general observation about members who managed to surmount difficult hurdles and remain observant is that the appeal of Mormon teachings tended to be paramount in the initial decision to convert; after baptism, however, social relationships within the church became increasingly influential in determining rates of activity. In congregations where there was warmth, acceptance, and a new network of friends, converts tended to flourish and stay involved; but where this nurturing environment was lacking and converts instead continually encountered cliques, bad examples, incompetent leadership, and social alienation, they were prone to drop out—often while still retaining positive feelings about Mormon life and doctrine.

While studying aspects of Mormonism that promote or hinder long-term church growth, a paradox emerged. Some features of Latter-day Saint religion—an emphasis on family, a lay clergy, a participatory style of worship, and a highly organized church structure—proved to be attractive *and* problematic: they were identified by converts as major reasons both for remaining active and for dropping out, depending on an individual's personal experience and on circumstances that varied from one congregation to another over time. In a family-centered society, the church's focus on family unity carried significant appeal, but pressure exerted by a close-knit, patriarchal family structure often adversely impacted decisions about converting or remaining active. Some converts were attracted to a church that provided opportunities for self-improvement through service and leadership in the religious community. Others eventually left the community because they could not adjust to the downside of lay leadership and high-cost religion: leaders who at times (especially early in the mission) were ill-prepared and authoritarian in style, and church callings

that produced feelings of discouragement and burnout from ministering to the heavy spiritual, emotional, and financial demands of fellow congregants.

A salient feature of the church—strong organization and management—promoted growth by supplying a steady stream of missionaries, curriculum materials, financial support, and other resources to support emerging church units in Italy. Its organizational capacity was crucial in mobilizing public affairs as well as humanitarian and interfaith efforts to raise the public profile of Mormonism and to foster political and religious alliances that paved the way to legal recognition and temple construction. But the church's managerial approach also seemed an uncomfortable fit in Italy, creating tension and disaffection among a significant number of converts who struggled to adjust to a high volume of meetings, reports, and tasks and to an administrative structure that—in spite of some reforms designed to simplify and decentralize decision making—remained too inflexible and insensitive to the ideas, needs, and time constraints of local members.

Concerning the question of why people convert and why they drop out, there was no shortage of opinions among Italian members. One church leader expressed the view—variations of which we encountered on numerous occasions—that converts fall into several categories: "those who join for the economic benefits that they think exist, like financial help or getting a visa to the US; those who join for the social benefits, such as friendship with missionaries and members; and those who join because they have an inner conviction—a testimony—of the truth of the restored gospel." In his opinion, converts in the first two categories tended to lapse into inactivity sooner or later, while those in the latter category remained committed and involved over the long term.

While this point of view about why converts stay or leave is not without some merit, it oversimplifies and distorts the complex reality surrounding religious change. As we have seen, a constellation of personal motives, social forces, and internal church dynamics are at play as spiritual seekers weigh options in the religious marketplace, and most converts make a multifaceted

decision based on innate human needs for meaning in life, group affiliation, and physical and economic well-being. And, once the decision to embrace a new religious community is made, the process of seeking and weighing religious experience continues, with some converts maintaining their new identity and many others either withdrawing to some degree or dropping out completely. Our research suggests that explaining disaffiliation primarily in terms of personal defects—weakness, insincerity, materialism, poor parenting, or lack of faith or conviction—inhibits deeper understanding of the fascinating question of why people join religious groups and why they drop out.