Why They Joined:
The Appeal of the
Contemporary Church

For many Italians, the arrival of young Mormons from the western United States seeking converts throughout Italy conjured up an unlikely scenario. As noted earlier, while news coverage was generally professional and respectful, it often reflected public attitudes of dismissiveness and skepticism. Yet the church's planting efforts gradually bore some fruit. While some Italians were offended by the "Mormon invasion" and most were unreceptive to their message, others listened out of politeness or curiosity or, at times, a sincere interest in exploring new avenues of spiritual meaning in a rapidly changing world. In the half century following 1965, the number of Italians who embraced the Mormon faith increased to about 25,000, with congregations and chapels scattered throughout the peninsula and islands of Italy. Not only the Mormons but a host of other religious minorities—Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, and Assemblies of God, to name a few—also made inroads in

Italy. There was, in fact, a small but growing demand in the Italian religious marketplace for exploring alternative spiritual paths—a "niche" waiting to be discovered by both producers (churches) and consumers (spiritual seekers).

The process of religious encounter, conversion, and adaptation that occurred as missionaries attempted to introduce the tenets of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to predominantly Catholic Italy suggests several interrelated questions: Why do some people abandon inherited or traditional beliefs and adopt new, alternative ways of seeking meaning and identity in life? What aspects of the LDS Church's theology, organization, and practice account for its slow but steady growth in Italy? This analysis concerning the LDS experience in Italy draws from extensive archival research and participant observation as well as from oral interviews and written surveys administered to more than three hundred Latter-day Saints who are from Italy or served there as missionaries. Informants in this research represent a cross-section of church membership that reflects its diversity in gender, age, race, geographic region, nationality, church experience, and level of observance.[1] To facilitate our discussion, we have employed a framework based on the map of religious change charted by Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian, who identify seven stages in the conversion process.[2]

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1. Note on methodology: We have generally omitted the names of the interview and survey participants in order to maintain anonymity and to respect privacy and confidentiality agreements in Italy. Surveys and oral interviews were conducted in LDS chapels or the homes of church members. Where possible, interviews were recorded digitally and later a typescript prepared. Often, however, interview notes were handwritten if interviewees felt uncomfortable with a recording device. These data were then indexed according to issues and themes that emerged from analyzing the interviews and survey material.

2. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, "Converting: Stages of Religious Change," in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant (London: Cassell, 1999), 23–34. The seven stages are context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. For a more detailed discussion of this model, see Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

Seeking Something More during Times of Turmoil

Disrupting experiences, whether external or personal in nature, often cause people to rethink their assumptions about life and to seek new avenues for finding spiritual meaning and fulfillment. Interview data clearly illustrate the pattern of crisis and quest that motivated many converts to entertain new possibilities for religious experience. Some of these motives were born of turbulent events in the surrounding social and political climate of the times, while some were generated by internal conflicts of conscience, faith, or personal loss.

Moral drift and lack of clear values in society. Contextual factors played a crucial role for a large percentage of converts who joined the church in the tumultuous period between 1965 and 1985. Individuals of diverse social, geographical, and religious backgrounds stated in interviews that a sense of societal drift and changing values in Italy heavily influenced their decision to embrace a new religion.

It was this quest to find a spiritual and moral anchor that prompted some investigators to face the social opprobrium and family pressure inherent in leaving a native religious tradition for a foreign, obscure faith tradition. "It was," as one convert stated, "a time of change, trial, looking for something different." Another felt that at the time of his conversion "there was a complete absence of good ideals. Rampant total corruption plagued our society, and still does. Divorce laws, feminism, and political parties destroyed the family and moral values. Honesty is practically nonexistent. . . . The LDS Church's clear message of moral standards and positive values like compassion, sincerity, and honesty has blessed me and my family."

Various converts pointed to moral and doctrinal clarity that the Mormon missionaries offered as the strongest impetus to adopt a new faith viewed as alien to Italian sensibilities:

I first knew about the Church at age 17 through a friend, but LDS teachings made me laugh. After a few years, when I met the

missionaries again, I had reached a point where I was unable to find an answer to any of my questions about life and what it means. I was heavily involved in politics as a student, and I was always dissatisfied with my life. I felt that my life should be something different, something more meaningful, than what I had been used to. I began to wonder what I would tell my children one day when they asked, Why was I born? Why must I die? I didn't know how I would respond, or what I would teach them when I had no sure answers myself. So it was the right time for me to encounter the missionaries, and I was impressed when they told me that if I prayed, I could receive a personal testimony or knowledge of my questions.

Disaffection with the Catholic Church. Studies of religiosity in postwar Italy have shown that many Italians became deeply disillusioned with the "religion of the Italians" (i.e., the Catholic Church), particularly in the years following the Vatican II council.[3] Many converts to new religious movements, including Mormonism, fell into this category of Catholics who were disturbed by various aspects of doctrine and policy, the involvement of their church in national politics, or the alleged corruption or lack of compassion among some of the clergy.

Changes in the traditional Catholic liturgy, especially after Vatican II, became an issue for some Italians who converted to other faiths. They expressed concern that ecclesiastical reforms seemed to cater to the whims of the people rather than God's will. In the late 1960s, for example, a union demonstration organizer joined the church but became inactive, then a few months later he came back. He had been counseled by his Catholic priest to "go back to the Mormon Church. They know where they're going—we don't." Another informant lamented that "the Catholic Church has been very indecisive, adapting itself to the people rather than

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3. Italian religious scholar Massimo Introvigne states that "a poll of Italians after World War II showed that they were ready to experience something different from the Roman Catholic Church." See Ronan James Head, "'An American Enterprise': An Interview with Massimo Introvigne," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 167. On the fallout from Vatican II, see Franco Garelli, *La Chiesa in Italia* (Bologna: Mulino, 2007), 9–31.

asking the people to adapt. For example, they began allowing people to listen to mass on the radio while on their way to the beach. This doesn't require sacrifice or serious commitment."

In every religious community, discontent with the actions of church leadership often leads some adherents to leave in search of new spiritual options. For example, one couple were both actively involved in the Catholic Church, but they felt disillusioned by the behavior of some Catholic leaders who preached honesty and sincerity but overcharged for services like communion and marriage and displayed disdain for parishioners from lower classes. "The straw that broke the camel's back was when the garbage man's son was rudely moved by a nun from the first row of mass to the back row, because it was reserved for rich professionals who could pay a lot." Other studies of religiosity in Italy have confirmed this cohort of religious seekers who disaffiliated from the Catholic Church because they were "against the priests."[4]

For some religious seekers, the theological explanations of their childhood were deemed inadequate to explain life's mysteries and contradictions or incompatible with one's personal *weltanschauung*. "I was baptized at age 16 in 1969," one convert said, "after hearing about the church from a friend. I was troubled by the Catholic teaching of infant baptism—it couldn't be right to baptize a baby who was pure and innocent." Another had many questions in religious class during his high school years regarding the inquisitions and cruel persecutions in religious history. He felt that the priests avoided direct answers or put off his questions. Finally, he "went to a priest to talk. He told me it is good to get to know other religions, but he could answer my questions only vaguely. The missionaries' answers and explanations really went inside me—deeply touched me." For many converts to new religious movements, traditional dogma and lack of satisfying explanations for life's absurdities fostered a spirit of inquisitiveness and searching:

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4. Introvigne et al., *Enciclopedia delle Religioni in Italia* (2001), 17.

> I didn't like the Catholic doctrine of "Mystery." Whatever question one would have that couldn't be answered, the priests would respond with "mystery." I didn't like this. The church I was to attend couldn't be one in which there were so many "mysteries." Why baptize little children? Why accept death-bed repentance? The plan of salvation made it so that I truly could accept the gospel. I also disliked the idea that we were all God's puppets and that we were predestined to do certain things in this life. The principle of agency learned from the plan of salvation truly made me ask to be baptized after three weeks.

One young convert "wanted to become a Catholic priest and felt the church was good" but did not feel spiritually moved by the Catholic rites. "I wanted something deeply meaningful—not just friendship, music, a group to belong to." In 1968, during the student demonstrations, he was studying law and philosophy. He met the missionaries at a street display and began studying with them: "I read the Joseph Smith pamphlet and viewed it as another ray of the same sun—I felt the same enduring spirit of goodness as in the Bible. I asked God in prayer, 'I want to know your view, not only mine.' I received a special testimony, a very strong, external, sweet influence from my head to my feet."

Personal crises and the search for existential meaning. Few experiences in life cause more profound emotional turmoil and soul-searching than the death of a friend or close family member. Many converts cited an experience of personal loss that forced them to grapple with their most deep-rooted anxieties and questions about the meaning of life. In many cases, the encounter with the LDS missionaries came in the immediate aftermath of a personal trial, and the spiritual perspective and inner peace they found as a result of this encounter were key elements in the difficult decision to embrace a new religion.

A young married couple had just lost their parents when they met the missionaries. After being taught about the eternal nature of families, the wife "had a testimony of being reunited with our parents in the hereafter. I could see a vision of this, and it convinced me." Another convert was quite active in the Catholic Church and did not feel a real need to change religion. In his

estimation, there were few differences between LDS and Catholic teachings. This changed when his grandfather died: "We had been very close to each other. The Mormon message of eternal family ties became extremely important to me and led to my conversion. This idea wasn't taught in the Catholic Church. When I had no problems in life, there was no motive to change."

Seeking alternative paths to spiritual fulfillment. In every religious marketplace there is a cohort of spiritual seekers—or to build on the metaphor, "shoppers"—who engage in religious exploration due less to external factors than to internal personal qualities: a curious mind searching for enlightened ideas, a moral conscience demanding greater clarity, or an inner voice yearning for deeper spiritual understanding. Contemporary LDS converts in this category are similar to many of the nineteenth-century Waldensian converts who responded positively to the early missionaries because of an innate sense of inquietude about life's meaning and an ongoing quest for illumination. One convert family explained that they "were searching for something. We were explorers—we didn't know where it was all leading. There were no other LDS Church members at the time in our city, so we were not attracted to the church by a need for friendship or community."

Two young married couples described how their quest for meaning and their openness to exploring alternative spiritual paths eventually led to an encounter with and conversion to a new faith:

> I was agnostic, but my wife and I were searching for something to believe in. We tried Hare Krishna and Buddhism. When we found the missionaries, I was struck by the wealth of knowledge and truth that the church offers. All my questions were answered, in an intelligent, logical way. This never happened in my contact with other churches. I was also attracted by the peaceful expressions of the LDS missionaries when I first met them at the street board.

> My husband and I, married just three years, were searching for something more spiritual. We were Catholic, but had tried other

religions like the Waldensian. After the missionaries found us while going door-to-door, we felt the spirit strongly. We felt we had already heard what was taught. It was powerful and changed our lives.

The Appeal of LDS Doctrine and Theology

Spiritual seekers eventually meet proponents of competing belief systems and engage in a process of evaluating a variety of new religious ideas. Social scientific research tends to emphasize contextual factors—psychological, social, and economic—that predispose individuals toward searching for and making rational choices about the options available in the religious economy. But missionaries and converts in many evangelically minded groups, the LDS Church included, focus more on the role of doctrine in the process of encounter, interaction, and commitment. That is, they hold that the inherent appeal of the message itself—the uniqueness, power, and beauty of the spiritual teachings they advocate—is the overriding factor in a person's decision whether or not to convert.

Most converts cited specific points of doctrine and theology as determinant in their decision to embrace Mormonism. While often acknowledging the impact of societal and family issues in their spiritual quest, converts of various ages and socioeconomic backgrounds overwhelmingly pointed to unique LDS teachings about the nature of God and man, the purpose of life, and eternal family bonds that they found refreshing and convincing.

A more intimate rapport with God. From the earliest period of church history, Mormon evangelism has emphasized the anthropomorphic nature of God the Father and his desire to bless and nurture his children in their mortal trials. This singular point of Latter-day Saint theology, long ridiculed by non-Mormon theologians as blasphemous, too literal and simplistic, or even puerile, has provided Mormonism a distinctive and attractive message that was, as we have seen, a significant factor in many conversions.

In contemporary missionary strategy, this fundamental doctrine of a personal God was often a focal point in the early phases of encounter and interaction between missionaries and prospec-

tive converts. Numerous converts pointed to the positive impact of this unusual theological perspective in shaping their choice to accept baptism. One observed that "in the Catholic Church, we were presented with the model of a cold, detached God with layers of saints and priests in between. The LDS teaching of an intimate, individual, personal rapport with God was essential in our conversion." This doctrine attracted a single mother suffering difficult personal problems: "I had always thought that Heavenly Father could have a body, so I believed this teaching immediately. That he isn't an abstract God but a personal, real God—this appealed to me. The LDS teaching about God's personal nature and care brought great comfort." Another explained that she had "always been a woman of great faith, praying to God even when churches were empty." But when missionaries taught her about the nature of God in Mormon thought, she felt "as if I already knew it":

> My mind opened to these ideas. We fasted with the missionaries, prayed, and felt great peace and joy. A strong internal voice said that God loved me, and this was a new feeling for me. I told all my friends. Having true friends, feeling the love of God daily, knowing that He is a real person, not abstract, and that we are his sons and daughters—all of this is very appealing, very sweet to us. It is easy to accept the prohibitions and commitments of the church if one has a testimony of these teachings.

Divine nature of man, eternal bonds of family. Italian converts consistently identified a second point of doctrine that was decisive in their encounter with missionaries: church teachings about the origin and destiny of man, referred to by Mormons as "the plan of salvation." This core tenet of LDS thought—a straightforward and logical presentation that addresses many imponderables of human existence and provides clear purpose in life—was deeply moving to many converts.

A church leader described the impact of the plan of salvation on a convert in Padua: "All his life he had looked for some sense to life and on two occasions had tried to end his life because of the way it had been going. Now he had a purpose and a goal and

something wonderful to work for. For him life has just begun."[5] Another church member cited these teachings as decisive in finding the courage to part ways with family and friends on matters of religion: "I was impressed by the logical explanations of the purpose of life. I came from a traditional, strong Catholic family and was afraid to offend them. But teachings about life's purpose persuaded me to convert to a new faith, Mormonism."

In Italian society, which has traditionally emphasized the centrality of family life as the primary means of fulfillment and protection, the message of strengthening marriage and parent/child relations and of creating family bonds that endure even beyond the grave resonated with many converts concerned about the erosion of family values: "There are some positive aspects of Italian tradition that work in favor of missionary work," one convert observed. "For example, the Italian people are closely attached to their families. The family is a strong institution here. So the church's teachings about fortifying families in this life and being together in the hereafter appeals to many Italians."

Mormon theology offers a singular take on the term "eternal life," which consists of an extension into the hereafter of the same sociality between family and friends that existed here on earth, and promises that these spiritual rewards are available to all people who make eternal covenants in an LDS temple, even those who died without the opportunity to receive the restored gospel.[6] Many converts saw in these doctrines a dimension of divine mercy and justice that was incomplete or absent in other religious options: "The doctrine of baptism for the dead—that all people have a chance for salvation—seemed just and merciful. Eternal marriage, not just until death do you part as in other churches, was important. The opportunity to see and live with friends and family after death appealed to us, and probably would to other Italians."

A lay clergy: opportunity for personal involvement. For the masses of converts in the early years of the nineteenth-century

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5. Leavitt Christensen to family, 30 January 1971, Christensen Papers.
6. Doctrine and Covenants sections 130, 132, and 137.

church, the opportunity to be personally engaged in a divine enterprise—migrating to and building God's kingdom on earth—carried "dramatic appeal" because it, "like democracy, provided abundant access to power and influence for people who had not experienced enough of it. . . . Once in the fold, the convert found himself reinforced by a variety of influences. Immediately he became involved."[7] A continually appealing dimension in contemporary LDS evangelism is this characteristic Mormon ethos of personal involvement in communal activities rather than passive participation in liturgical rites, of individual empowerment through meaningful service, and of discovering innate talents, developing untapped capacity, and contributing time and means to a transcendent cause. Some studies of religious conversion have evaluated the reasons that churches with a lay clergy (i.e., not professionally trained for an ecclesiastical career) requiring high participation of all adherents generally experience greater growth and vitality.[8]

This aspect of LDS worship was a key ingredient in contemporary conversion narratives. A high percentage of converts, having been accustomed to religious traditions that demanded limited personal participation, were impressed during Mormon meetings to observe a more democratic model of religious experience. This included a wide variety of congregants—men, women, teenagers, and children—involved in carrying out various assignments (in Mormon parlance, "callings"), giving talks, teaching lessons, administering sacramental rites, providing leadership, and performing other charitable deeds. The promise of self-improvement and fulfillment through meaningful service to others proved highly attractive to many Italians.

A female convert felt attracted to Mormonism because its women's organization, the Relief Society, offered opportunities to become personally involved in ways that were "unique, allowing women to use feminine talents." Her colleagues at work were

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7. Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 40–41.

8. See, for example, Rodney Stark and Roger Fink, *Acts of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), chap. 6, "Religious Group Dynamics."

"impressed that we women do these things with the support of our husbands." A male convert spoke of never having experienced as a young man in a Catholic parish "any spiritual sensation that was able to involve me directly." He went to church because his parents told him to go. But with his introduction to the LDS Church at age fifteen, he began to have "opportunities to serve in the church in leadership and teaching positions. I think this has marked my whole life in the church, that from the beginning I have always served." It was this ethos of personal involvement and improvement that continually reinforced his commitment to Mormonism and to active participation for many years. A young family in Siracusa asked many questions of the Mormon missionaries and soon realized that "this was a church that required a person to work a lot." For them, the issue was not only the truth of Mormon doctrine or history, but something more pragmatic: "If you have a desire to work," the husband told his wife, "then we can get baptized; otherwise, it's better that we stay the way we are and do nothing." In the end they decided that "working and serving . . . was the only way to be happy, so we made the choice to be baptized."

The search for self-realization by working for the betterment of society became a leitmotif in LDS conversion narratives. Typical of this idealistic personal quest that leads to religious conversion is the story of a young man growing up during World War II who always had the "idea of working for the progress of the individual. I felt an enormous need to be actively involved in helping each individual develop himself and improve his condition in life." For this reason he joined the Communist Party, which at that time promoted the improvement of individual rights in Italian society, but he eventually became disillusioned with Communism and party politics in general:

> I realized that something was missing in my life—that the initiative of developing the individual was not just related to the temporal side of life, but that there must be development of a spiritual nature. In other words, I had been involved in only half the problem. I began a search with my wife—we had contact

with the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Muslims—we looked a lit-
tle everywhere to find something that would fill that void that we
had been feeling. That void was filled when I met two Mormon
missionaries at a street meeting on a beautiful day in 1974. They
spoke to me of becoming a true disciple of Christ through per-
sonal service, and I was baptized a few weeks later.

Charismatic Spiritual Experiences

Charismatic expressions of the divine presence, identified
in the Bible and modern church revelations, include "the gift of
tongues, prophecy, revelation, visions, healing, interpretation of
tongues, and so forth."[9] In 1845, after hearing Mormon mission-
aries preach in a public hall in Lowell, Massachusetts, the Ameri-
can poet John Greenleaf Whittier concluded that the emphasis on
individual encounter with God's power was at the root of the new
movement's growth:

> In listening to these modern prophets, I discovered, as I think,
> the great secret of their success in making converts. They speak
> to a common feeling; they minister to a universal want. They
> contrast strongly the miraculous power of the gospel in apos-
> tolic time with the present state of our nominal Christianity. . . .
> They ask for any declaration in the Scriptures that this mirac-
> ulous power of faith was to be confined to the first confessors
> of Christianity. They speak a language of hope and promise to
> weak, weary hearts, tossed and troubled, who have wandered
> from sect to sect, seeking in vain for the primal manifestations of
> the divine power.[10]

Like the Waldensian converts during the nineteenth century,
converts in modern Italy frequently recounted extraordinary
spiritual experiences that imbued them with assurance about
the veracity of the missionaries' message, courage to overcome

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9. See, for example, 1 Corinthians 12:10, D&C 46:10–26, and Pearl of Great Price,
"Articles of Faith."

10. "Whittier Attends a Mormon Conventicle," in *Among the Mormons: Historic
Accounts by Contemporary Observers*, ed. William Mulder and A. Russell Mortensen
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 156–59.

family and peer pressure, and a sense of inner peace in having experienced firsthand, in a new and unexpected way, the divine. Charismatic experiences of this nature are the essence of religious conversion in nearly every faith tradition and thus are essential in analyzing the various external and internal factors that impact an individual's choice about religious change. One scholar noted, "Religious people affirm that the purpose of conversion is to bring people into relationship with the divine and provide them a new sense of meaning and purpose. Theologians consider this dimension absolutely essential to the whole process of human transformation; other factors are subordinate to it."[11]

Visions, dreams, and faith healings. The history of Mormonism begins with a heavenly vision in which God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared in response to the prayer of a young Joseph Smith. Beginning with this foundational narrative of a personal God willing to reveal his will to common humanity, Mormon history brims with accounts of visions and dreams and other extraordinary manifestations of the Divine that lead an individual or family to conversion.

In the modern world, these sorts of supernatural experiences are often viewed with skepticism, if not rejected out of hand. But this was generally not the case in Italy, where reports of appearances by the Madonna, intercession by saints, and miraculous healings and visions often appear in the press and form an integral part of popular religious culture.[12] So the notion that Joseph Smith could experience a divine manifestation does not in and of itself constitute a major obstacle for many Italians who, upon hearing the missionaries' recounting of the First Vision, respond

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11. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, 10; see also Henri Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 138–39.

12. Gabriele De Rosa, "Conclusioni [Religione e religiosità popolare]" and Caterina Eva Nobile, "La Madonna della Consolazione a Reggio Calabria: Storia e Devozione," *Ricerche di Storia Sociale e Religiosa* 6, no. 11 (January–June 1977): 177–92, and 343–380; Patrick McCarthy, "The Church in Post-War Italy," in *Italy Since 1945*, ed. Patrick McCarthy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133, 140, 151–52; Ginsborg, *Italy and Its Discontents*, 133; Jim Gallagher, *Padre Pio: The Pierced Priest* (London: Fount, 1995).

by sharing a similar account from the Italian Catholic context. One convert typified this open attitude on the part of Italians to the miraculous narratives of others with a positive spin: "Joseph Smith's first vision was not hard for me to accept. Italians from a religious background believe in visions and dreams."

Other converts to Mormonism echoed this same sentiment: that the First Vision did not represent a major obstacle to their conversion. They were far more interested in understanding the consequences of that divine encounter—new spiritual insights about the nature of God and the purpose of human existence that would distinguish Smith's prophetic voice in the morass of competing truth claims. Of course, a religious culture inclined to acceptance of charismatic experience can be a two-edged sword for missionaries seeking converts. While it creates an atmosphere in which church teachings about visions and spiritual gifts will normally not be rejected out of hand, it also can work against proselytizing efforts by diminishing the uniqueness of the Joseph Smith narrative.

There are numerous examples of Italian Latter-day Saints for whom visions, dreams, and faith healings played a vital role in their conversions. Contemporary converts to Mormonism spoke of premonitions and visions that provided foreknowledge of things to come and courage to make difficult decisions. Pietro Emmanuele Giannini had a dream as a boy in which he looked out a window and clearly saw the words "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" written on the side of a mountain. Later on, while living temporarily in Argentina, he saw the same name on a Mormon chapel. [13]

Another convert "had a dream of two young men coming to my house—'two angels' who would bring an important message of joy and peace. When the Mormon missionaries knocked on my door, I accepted them and their message because I knew they were sent by God." For another religious seeker, struggling to withstand pressure from friends and family, a spiritual manifestation made

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13. Christensen, "History of the LDS Church in Italy, Swiss Mission"; and Christensen, Letter, 25 July 1965, Christensen Papers.

the difference: "My father had passed away two months earlier. One night, I dreamed that my father came to me, embraced me, and said, 'Finally I am happy. I am a Mormon now.' I didn't speak about this with my family or friends, but this dream or vision gave me the courage to be baptized."

Charismatic spiritual manifestations also provided some converts the willpower to break old habits and assume new religious behaviors. A heavy smoker and self-described "coffee addict" who drank fifteen to twenty cups per day was interested in the message of the Mormon missionaries but physically and emotionally incapable of observing the Word of Wisdom, a prerequisite for baptism. "In the morning if I didn't have coffee I couldn't get up from bed, and I couldn't get up from the table to go to work." So, he followed the advice of the missionaries and prayed. That night he had a dream in which "I saw my whole life from six years of age to the time I must leave this earth, and I saw many things that at that moment were still to be in the future. Today, I can say that I saw how my life would unfold and that it has actually unfolded according to what was revealed in the dream." After the dream, he woke up and told his wife, "Tomorrow I am calling the missionaries and making an appointment to be baptized."

Spiritual confirmation from reading the Book of Mormon. While Latter-day Saint missionaries present a systematic, logical presentation of basic doctrine to their investigators, these discussions are viewed primarily as a means to prepare an individual for what is considered the vital and consummating step in conversion, "receiving a testimony," which is a spiritual manifestation from God that confirms the truth of the message. Mormons believe that without this personal confirmation from God—who promises this gift to all humble, sincere seekers—true conversion cannot occur. One study concluded that personal charismatic experience was determinative for converts in the early period of church history:

> One must avoid exaggerating the importance of [rational evidence] in the conversion experiences of the time. All agreed that the sine qua non was the manifestation of the Spirit, or the

still small voice—some kind of inner confirmation by which one knew and knew that he knew. . . . External evidence was not, therefore, the sole source of the decisions to convert. It was circumstantial, confirming, predisposing. And it was cumulative, multiplying its force with each additional factor. But conversion itself was individual, personal, spiritual.[14]

LDS missiology has long stressed the central role of the Book of Mormon in bringing investigators to experience spiritual conversion. Italian converts to Mormonism often cited their experience in reading and praying about the Book of Mormon as a turning point in their conversion decision. A common thread running through these accounts is that reading the Book of Mormon brought new insight about spiritual life, deeper understanding of human relationships, and the assurance needed to change religious paths:

I read the Book of Mormon with an open mind. The first pages scandalized me; I didn't like them too much. But later, when I re-read them, they answered many questions for me. This was a period of revolution, of political turmoil in Italy. The stories of Mosiah and Alma had a strong spiritual impact on me. I felt like a spiritual infant: humble, ready to listen and learn. I felt the Spirit, and knowledge and light came to me.

Since World War II, I had been an Adventist. The Mormon missionaries came knocking on doors in 1969, but as Adventists we were confident in our religion. I was curious, though. . . [and] began reading the Book of Mormon all the time—this is what touched me the most. Every page brought the Spirit of God into my life. Later, as a parent, it helped me in raising my children.

Discussion of the Book of Mormon and related issues of archeology and links to the American Indians and the visit of Christ—all rang true. I had hypothesized these things. I had read about the White God who according to Indian legend visited the American

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14. Arrington and Bitton, *The Mormon Experience*, 41.

continent. Tithing was relatively easy after that. I had been a heavy smoker, but was able to quit.

A church leader from the Puglia region recounted his experience as a young teenager who, though believing in God and practicing his Catholic faith, "didn't have clear ideas—hadn't ever really asked myself many basic questions about life." After meeting and studying with the Mormon missionaries, he left for summer vacation having promised them that he would pray about the truth of their message and read the Book of Mormon while he was away. An avid reader who routinely brought a book to bed, he began to peruse the Mormon scripture, reluctantly at first, but then with increasing fascination:

> It was just like a fire. In just a few days I read all of the first two books of Nephi. Every evening was like a discovery—truly those words seemed to be written just for me. . . . That was the most incredible sensation that I had ever had in my life up to that moment. I truly felt a very strong spirit, even you might say, unequivocal. It was clear that there was no outside influence—it was a completely new, internal experience for me, and I knew that it was an encounter with a power that I had never before experienced in that way. Today I know that that power is called the Spirit, but at that time I only knew that there was something like a veil that was lifted from my eyes, and I was committed. I had tears in my eyes, a feeling of great trust in the things that I had been reading.

As with many other converts, with that moment of clarity about the Book of Mormon came inner conviction to join the church.

A Sense of Belonging: Bonds of Friendship and Community

In addition to the experiences of Italian Mormon converts in the realms of believing (acceptance of doctrines about the nature of God and the purpose of human existence) and of becoming (personal engagement in altruism that develops a more God-like character), some Italian Latter-day Saints also spoke of the

persuasive power of a third element of Christian discipleship—belonging—in their conversion accounts. A strong sense of community, buttressed by the promise of human and divine relationships that endure forever, has long characterized the Mormon experience. Mormon historian Terryl Givens sees this aspect of Mormon life as "the great secret of how Mormonism became not just another church, not just a thriving institution, but a people for whom the words brother and sister carry more than metaphoric significance."[15]

Latter-day Saint converts in Italy reported that their gradual exposure to and immersion in the social relationships, roles, and rituals of the Mormon community proved a decisive factor in their conversion. The intense sociality of Mormon religious experience created satisfying friendships that sustained and reassured them as they contemplated whether or not to embrace a new spiritual orientation. The affection, sincerity, and support of the members and missionaries—and the rituals and roles that preserve these qualities of communal life—were often cited as key factors in the decision to leave one faith tradition and embrace a new one.

A constant refrain in conversion accounts is that the friendship and compassion of Mormon missionaries exerted significant impact in the conversion process. One member, who was baptized after his father at age fourteen, was impressed by "the inner beauty of the missionaries. I was searching for the truth, something more in life. The lessons were very dense—it was hard to understand it all. But the goodness of the missionaries touched me deeply." A young Communist who loved intellectual discussions joined the church at age nineteen: "The example of the missionaries' love and friendship was most important in my conversion. I saw something different in their lives that I wanted in my life." Another convert was attracted by what he called "the fruits of religion" that, in his opinion, "distinguished the Mormon church from other churches. I didn't like the attitude that I often heard expressed in the Catholic Church while growing up: 'Do as the priests say, not

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15. Terryl L. Givens, "'Lightning Out of Heaven': Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community," *BYU Studies* 45, no. 1 (2006): 5–21.

as they do.' The goodness and morality of the members and missionaries—the fruits of the gospel—were an important part of my conversion."

For some converts, a new sense of belonging and communal support proved transformative and brought relief from personal problems such as low self-esteem, physical impediments, social ineptness, and addictions of various kinds.

> I was twenty-five when baptized—a student who played cards with friends and had no direction in life. When I went to the LDS Church for the first time with a fellow student, I felt immediately accepted—the warmth of friendship. I had a speech problem—I stuttered—and was very self-conscious of this. I felt useless and incapable. In the Mormon community I was taught that we all have good in us despite our weaknesses, and I was surrounded by new friends who supported and encouraged me. After baptism I realized I could be useful—I had a strength to perform service. This was very important to me.

> The sisters in the branch helped me overcome my concerns about the Word of Wisdom and giving up wine that was a big part of our family tradition. This is what struck the most: the unity and support of the members, their patience and love for each other. I was impressed that they tried to treat each other according to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Why They Stayed: Patterns of Conflict and Adaptation among Active Mormons

The decision to embrace Mormonism constitutes, for most Italian converts, a dramatic turning point that will potentially impact their lives at every level: worldview, identity, lifestyle, and relationships. During the period of encounter and interaction with missionaries and members (which can last from as little as a few weeks to several months or even years), potential converts, or *simpatizzanti* (investigators), began to understand the rewards and demands inherent in leaving one's previous spiritual orientation to join the Mormon community. In addition to the religious

benefits, they gradually learned about the social and economic costs of adopting a "counterculture" lifestyle and identity: abstention from wine, cigarettes, and coffee, and significant financial donations and time commitments—all of which can cause alienation from family, friends, and work colleagues. In short, converts had to come to terms with an underlying paradox: religious conversion creates both cohesion and conflict.

The rite of baptism, as Rambo and Farhadian note, is a crucial stage in the conversion process: the outward symbol of an inner commitment to "devote [one's life] to a new spiritual orientation" and a "public demonstration of the status change." But the initial act of *commitment* is mere prelude to a continual realization of the *consequences* of that act: experiences, actions, and beliefs that subsequently bolster or weaken a convert's resolve. They and other religious scholars have concluded that "authentic conversion is an ongoing process of transformation. The initial change, while crucial, is a first step in a long trajectory of transformation."[16]

Mormons also view conversion as a long-term endeavor, a marathon rather than a sprint, with baptism representing a point of embarkation on a continuing journey of change, learning, growth, and service. The process of religious change requires active engagement in roles, rituals, and relationships throughout one's lifetime. Converts, both those who have remained active and those who have dropped out, continually reassess the validity of their religious identity and affiliation in coping with a shifting set of realities in life.

Approximately 25 to 30 percent of Italian converts participate regularly in church activities, meaning that they attend sacrament meeting at least one Sunday each month. Interview data gathered from these "active" Mormons reveal several factors that contributed to their successful adaptation to the social and behavioral demands of church membership and their consequent higher level of participation.

A general trend that emerged from the experience of these highly committed members is that they tended to make a relatively

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16. Rambo and Farhadian, "Converting: Stages of Religious Change," 31–33.

seamless transition to Mormonism after baptism. This occurred either because they found the beliefs and norms "familiar" and compatible with their lifestyle and worldview before conversion and therefore required only minor adjustments to adopt these norms or, more commonly, they made difficult accommodations to behavioral requirements and were consistently keeping these commitments for a period of time (which varied from several weeks to several months) *before* their baptism. In the first instance, one church member reported that conversion consisted of "very gradual changes," explaining that adopting a new spiritual orientation had "no great immediate impact because I felt the same spirit in the LDS Church as I had in reading the Bible." Concerning the second instance, a member described his struggle before baptism to accept and live the law of chastity, given a cultural setting in which the Christian principle of sexual abstinence before marriage is often ignored. He observed that he had to completely "rethink my relationship with girls" and then make difficult choices to change his personal behavior and adopt a new lifestyle before his baptism.

Adjusting to alienation of family and friends. The role of social networks proved crucial to the growth of nineteenth-century Mormonism and other new religions.[17] However, during the early years of the second Italian mission, family connections often exerted a negative influence in shaping the decisions of many Italian Mormons about whether to join and stay active.

In many instances, converts reported that their conversion to the Mormon faith elicited hostile reactions from family and friends (e.g., opposition, accusations of brainwashing, threats of ostracism, and pressure to recant and return). It was not uncommon for converts to struggle with conflicting loyalties when their decision to convert was viewed as a betrayal of their family: "My

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17. As noted in chapters 1–4, many of the early Waldensian converts to Mormonism joined along family lines. See also Allen et al., *Men with a Mission, 1837–1841*, 24, 28–31, 50, 91 on kinship ties in the success of the Twelve in England; and Stark and Finke, *Acts of Faith*, 116–18, 127–35 on social networks and conversion in the Unification Church and early Mormonism. The authors of *Men with a Mission* also note "the divisive effect" that conversion to a new religion sometimes had on families (36).

sister's response to my getting baptized was, 'You've been fooled! What is this you have done? You dishonor your mother, your father, and all of the principles that they taught you!'" At times, negative reactions were based in fears fed by old stereotypes and misinformation: "My husband was upset when I converted. He had read an encyclopedia article about the Mormons and was afraid that they might secretly marry me to someone else." Sometimes family members and friends attributed the bewildering choices associated with conversion to the immaturity and impetuosity of youth: "My family felt I was just passing through a difficult phase and would regain my senses. I broke off my engagement and quit working as a lawyer because it compromised my principles of honesty and integrity. My family didn't like or understand all these changes in my life."

As a result of these cross-pressures in their lives, Italian "pioneer converts" commonly faced daunting social stigmas and were obliged to go it alone (i.e., to leave behind previous networks and forge new bonds of belonging and support). According to one informant, "Many of the early members from the late '60s and early '70s remained faithful, despite having no support and making great sacrifices. We had to detach from everything." In Italy, converts generally did not experience a complete rupture with family members, although relations sometimes remained strained for a time even in more liberal families and tolerant regions of the country. A convert from Modena in Emilia Romagna, where people were generally "known to have open minds, to be free thinkers," reported that his mother "was disappointed when I joined the Mormon Church, but gave me my choice." His two brothers, on the other hand, "thought I was being brainwashed by the missionaries, so I had to finish the discussions outside of our home."

While converts to Mormonism sometimes felt impelled to detach quite abruptly from their friends and acquaintances outside the family circle, sometimes this process of relinquishing and rebuilding social networks was the result of a gradual, natural evolution in lifestyle. As the convert from Modena observed, "There was very little opposition from my friends. Eventually, however,

my involvement in LDS Church service separated me from my old friends, and I formed a new circle of friends."

Although many who joined the church did not weather the sting of social opprobrium and eventually withdrew from participation, those who managed to absorb the initial social costs of conversion noted that factors such as commitment to following one's own conscience and conviction about the efficacy of Mormon teachings helped them maintain their resolve over the long term. One member lamented that making a personal religious choice cost him the affection of his brother who "felt betrayed by my conversion. We are still estranged today. But I had a spiritual assurance this was right, and I had to follow my conscience." Another convert reported that, because he was only seventeen when he met the missionaries, and his parents disapproved his request to be baptized, he had to wait until his eighteenth birthday to become a Mormon. "This almost caused a war in the family, who viewed my conversion as a form of betrayal. For me it was a matter of losing my friends, becoming a strange person, and having problems at school. But I felt that my choice was right, and this gave me strength. I was drawn by teachings about respect for every human being, the positive view of women and the family, and the physical benefits of the Word of Wisdom."

It was not uncommon that, with time and effort to maintain good relations, family members and friends who had originally displayed hostility toward a convert's new religious affiliation softened their attitudes, coming to admire the church and its lifestyle, respect the decision to change religions, and, in some cases, even convert to Mormonism.

> At first my conversion was difficult for my family because of the traditions here in Sicily. But I am content because if one accepts the Church and seriously obeys the commandments, in time he or she becomes an example that others admire. After twenty years my mother was baptized in the church. My relatives, even though they are all Catholic, do not oppose the principles of the LDS Church; on the contrary, when I don't go to church regularly, they remind me. They know of my church obligations. When I

visit them, they serve orzo coffee instead of black coffee, beer without alcohol, and sweets without a coffee or alcohol base. My experience is that it all has to do with a convert's steadfastness: if a person is truly converted, others don't generally try to interfere in decisions. The problem is when a person is indecisive, then others attempt to take advantage or to dissuade her.

The missionaries held meetings in our home in Pozzuoli in the late 1970s. Our neighbors thought we were doing black magic in our home because of the singing and the Americans coming in. Our children were insulted at school. My mother completely rejected me: "You're no longer my daughter if you accept this heresy." My sister wouldn't speak to me for twenty years. Later in life, my mother gained respect for our religion because she liked our new lifestyle. She even requested a priesthood blessing from my husband when she was dying. We helped reunite our family. They have often said, now after many years, that we have something very special: more patience and love. Constant kindness, learned in the Church, helped overcome the bad feelings of our family.

Positive effects of Italy's increasingly tolerant religious climate. While many early Mormon converts experienced some degree of social backlash from family and friends, they commonly made mention of Italy's evolving social and religious climate. By the early 1980s, they noted that Italian society had become much more open and tolerant in matters of religious choice.

According to several members, social stigmatizing of religious minorities began to recede into the past (e.g., "Italy is a multi-ethnic, multireligious society now" and as a result "there is little if any persecution against LDS youth or converts. Many different religious groups are represented, at least here in the north"). One Mormon parent stated that her children are "busy with school, music, and sports" and that "there is no persecution that we have noticed at school." A common theme was that friends and neighbors generally admire religiosity in any form, but have little interest in changing religions or becoming religiously observant:

"Being a religious minority, those around me have esteem and respect for me, but aren't willing to make a change themselves."

Some converts attributed this "live and let live" attitude to a tradition of religiosity in Italy that fosters spiritual belief and identity in society but does not demand heavy commitments. They thought that this factor contributed to the trend among Italians toward "believing without belonging"; i.e., maintaining spiritual inclinations while downplaying the importance of formal religious practice or affiliation with a particular church. For one convert, religion in Italy was "more of a tradition" because, in his opinion, "the Catholic religion is not one that requires much participation." For this reason, "there wasn't much problem from our family and colleagues at work. Sometimes they would make fun of us a little when we wouldn't drink wine, but it wasn't a big problem." Several parents stated that this religious trend in Italy made it less threatening—and even advantageous in some ways— to practice a minority religion:

> Raising a family here in Tuscany has been difficult at times but not insurmountable. We do all the programs of the church: Family Home Evening, family prayer, scripture study. Our children aren't ashamed to belong to a minority church. It's a positive thing that they attend the Catholic religion class in school: they get to know Italian culture and history, and appreciate other religions. It doesn't worry me, because Catholicism doesn't involve a person completely—it isn't profound in that way.

> When you have a testimony of the gospel, you have a well-defined view of life, and the social and political problems don't bother you as much. You're not represented well in society, but you can still be respected. My children are admired at school for stating they don't drink or smoke because they live according to certain guidelines.

Although many converts spoke about an improved climate of pluralism and tolerance, it is important to avoid overgeneralization. Attitudes toward a more diverse religious landscape vary from region to region: southern Italians tend to be more conser-

vative in religious and social matters than northern Italians,[18] and many Italians express less tolerance for some minority religions than others. To cite just one example, Muslims in Italy, for a variety of historical and sociopolitical reasons, have continued to encounter obstacles in their efforts to achieve legal recognition and integration, even though they constitute the second largest faith community in the country.[19]

Spiritual benefits of a new religious identity and community. With regard to the 25–30 percent of converts who have continued to participate regularly, a common thread emerged in the research data. Those who remained had evaluated the pluses and minuses inherent in their church membership and concluded that the spiritual and social rewards that initially attracted them to the church outweigh—and indeed were seen as a product of—the adjustments they made to accommodate some discomfort resulting from social alienation; high financial and time demands; and unfamiliar features of worship, leadership, and organization in the Mormon community. Converts who successfully made these adjustments, like the three quoted below, reported that they discovered deeper levels of meaning, fulfillment, and belonging in life. While drawing upon the best of their family heritage, Italian culture, Catholic background, and Mormon spirituality, they gradually assumed a transformed identity—Italian Latter-day Saint:

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18. See, for example, data on attitudes about marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and sexual mores in Silvana Salvini and Alessandra De Rose, *Rapporto sulla Popolazione: L'Italia a 150 Anni dall'Unità* (Bologna: Mulino, 2011), 34-45; Monica Santoro, *Conoscere la famiglia e i suoi cambiamenti* (Rome: Carocci, 2013); Marzio Barbagli, Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna, and Franco Garelli, *La Sessualità degli Italiani* (Bologna: Mulino, 2010), 27–28.

19. James A. Toronto, "*Islam Italiano*: Prospects for Integration of Muslims in Italy's Religious Landscape," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28, no. 1 (April 2008): 66–71. See also Silvio Ferrari, ed., *Musulmani in Italia: La Condizione Giuridica delle Comunità Islamiche* (Bologna: Mulino, 2000); Paolo Branca, *Moschee Inquiete: Tradizionalisti, Innovatori, Fondamentalisti nella Cultura Islamica* (Bologna: Mulino, 2003); and Antonio Angelucci, Maria Bombardieri, and Davide Tacchini, eds., *Islam e Integrazione in Italia* (Venice: Marsilio, 2014).

Wherever I am, the important thing for me is my personal spir-
itual preparation, and the blessings of inner peace and strength
it brings.

I make a constant effort to draw close to Christ. The restored gos-
pel is my life. When I first converted I felt part of a community;
now I feel part of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is more important
to me now to feel the blessings of the gospel in my personal life. I
am moving toward total conversion in this way.

The full organization of the church is operating well now, as op-
posed to the early days. This helps us grow and learn. With more
members, there are fewer opportunities to speak in church. But
we are strengthened by the spirit of the church members, and the
opportunity to have Italian leaders and families has been a great
blessing. We have our share of problems and challenges; we're
not perfect. But we have great friendship, spiritual support, and
commitment. It is my island of peace and comfort in a hectic
world.

As part of the assessment of costs and benefits that contin-
ues after baptism, active converts often cited pragmatic aspects of
Mormon life as reasons for their continuing commitment to the
faith. These included positive outcomes of a participatory, lay reli-
gion that carried over into daily life, such as developing interper-
sonal skills, acquiring leadership experience, and improving fam-
ily relations. One church member emphasized self-improvement
as a major benefit of continued church affiliation: "The church
changes people for the good. Our daughter was very shy. She
didn't want to have her baptism performed in front of people or to
pray publicly. But later she went on a mission and did extremely
well in talking with people." More than a few converts cited exam-
ples of career enhancement that were tied to their church partic-
ipation: "My leadership experience in the church has taught me
principles that have helped immensely in my professional life:
organizational and interpersonal skills—how to treat people. I
apply LDS principles at work: the notion that no program is more
important than the individual, and the idea of common consent
and consensus in making decisions." Another common assertion

was that, after embracing Mormonism, converts' approaches to parenting and family life had changed for the better:

> We were raising our children according to our traditional ways when we joined the church. We used to spank our children when we needed to make them understand what they needed to do. But after accepting the gospel, we learned that this wasn't right and we stopped doing it. As a result, we have become a very close-knit, loving family that spends a lot of time together. The principles we learned in the church have helped us a lot to be better parents and have a stronger family.

A number of recent studies in the United States examined how this pragmatic dimension of Mormon teaching—which emphasizes individual empowerment, family priorities, hard work, progress, education, and patriotism—might help explain the surprisingly high number of prominent Mormon figures in business, media, and politics.[20]

The success of the LDS Church in Italy since 1965 has been influenced by a combination of historical timing, doctrinal uniqueness, and a traditionally strong sense of community. Mormonism's advent in Italy during a time of crisis and transformation attracted the attention of a segment of Italian society who were open to exploring new spiritual paths. As was the case with converts to other new religious movements, Italians who joined the church were seeking answers to existential questions, deeper sources of spiritual fulfillment, and greater security and direction in a rapidly changing world. Many were disillusioned

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20. Stephen Mansfield, *The Mormonizing of America: How the Mormon Religion Became a Dominant Force in Politics, Entertainment, and Pop Culture* (Brentwood, TN: Worthy Publishing, 2012), 30–41. See also Caroline Winter, "God's MBAs: Does the Mormon Faith Build Better Leaders?," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 9 June 2011, 58–64; Walter Kirn, "The Mormon Moment: How the Outsider Faith Creates Winners," *Newsweek*, 13 and 20 June 2011, 38–45; G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "How Mormons—like Romney—Cultivate Business Savvy Early On," *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 May 2012, http://www.csmonitor.com/Business/2012/0514/How-Mormons-like-Romney -cultivate-business-savvy-early-on.

by doctrines, practices, and leaders of the dominant church and responded favorably to LDS teachings about a personal God, eternal family bonds, charismatic spiritual experience, and opportunities for individual participation and development within a supportive religious group.

Nevertheless, the process of quest, encounter, and commitment does not end at the baptismal font: individuals continue to engage in spiritual inquiry, evaluation, and transformation, leading some adherents to increasing levels of involvement and satisfaction over time, but bringing others to gradually disengage and disaffiliate from the church. Paradoxically, some of the factors that draw people to Mormonism also drive others away, either before or after baptism.