

## INTRODUCTION

**F**rom its founding in 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has vigorously pursued a worldwide program of missionary outreach. Latter-day Saints view proselytizing as a fundamental duty of Christian discipleship deriving from Jesus' injunction that his disciples go to all the world and teach the gospel to every nation and creature (see Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15). The "Great Mandate," according to LDS theology, is rooted in the doctrine that human salvation lies in embracing God's message of universal redeeming grace that is found in its fullness only in Christ and his church, which for Latter-day Saints means the church restored by Joseph Smith in 1830. This mandate has given rise to a strong missionary ethos among church members that emphasizes the benefits to be gained by both missionaries and converts and the urgency of sharing the message worldwide before the imminent return of Christ (see Doctrine and Covenants 4:1–4).

This emphasis on evangelization has produced steady church growth, from six members present at the organizational meeting on 6 April 1830 to a worldwide membership of over fifteen million, located in nearly two hundred countries, and a missionary force of approximately 74,000 serving in 418 missions. The number of church members outside North America (Canada, U.S., and Mexico) recently passed the 50 percent mark and is climbing, most notably in Central and South America, Africa, and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of this growth stems from recruitment rather than fertility: there were about four converts per child baptism in the 1990s with the ratio declining to 2.4 converts per child baptism by 2003.<sup>2</sup>

The church's international growth has attracted the attention of scholars and journalists who see in Mormonism an informative case for understanding issues in human religious experience such as evangelism, conversion, and the cross-cultural movement of new belief systems. Nearly a century ago, German historian Eduard Meyer, who had an academic interest in the growth of religious movements, asserted that "Mormonism is one of the most instructive examples in the history of religion; it is strange that students of religion often turn to remote and unintelligible sects of past or primitive races for enlightenment, having disdained or ignored the rich source of information which Mormonism offers, with its manifold parallels in other fields of historical research."<sup>3</sup> More recently, scholars have observed that "LDS growth has

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1. The data cited are from the Church's annual statistical report, "Worldwide Statistics," Mormon Newsroom, [www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics](http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics).

2. Gary Shepherd and Gordon Shepherd, *Mormon Passage: A Missionary Chronicle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), section on "Sources of Mormon Growth," 3–5; and F. Michael Watson, "Statistical Report, 2003," *Ensign*, May 2004, 26.

3. Eduard Meyer, *The Origin and History of the Mormons: With Reflections on the Beginnings of Islam and Christianity*, trans. Heinz F. Rahde and Eugene Seach (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1961), i. [*Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen: mit Exkursen über die Anfänge des Islams und des Christentums* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1912)]. See the assessment of Meyer's historical methods in Arnold H. Green, "Mormonism and Islam: From Polemics to Mutual Respect and Cooperation," *BYU*

attracted the attention of religious leaders, politicians, journalists, and scholars alike who have begun to contemplate the emerging portents of a ‘new religious tradition.’”<sup>4</sup> In addition, sociologist Rodney Stark suggested that examining the growth of Mormonism can shed light on why some religious movements succeed while others fail.<sup>5</sup>

The early evangelization strategy of the church envisioned Italy, the home of the Catholic Church, as a focal point for declaring the message of Mormonism in Europe and, from there, expanding to the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. In 1849, Lorenzo Snow of the Quorum of the Twelve and Joseph Toronto, an Italian convert, were called by Brigham Young to go to the Italian peninsula and there begin to establish a foothold for the church. They arrived in Italy in 1850 and, concluding that the major cities promised few prospects because of Catholic influence, began their missionary labors among the Protestant Waldensian people of northwestern Piedmont. Their efforts set in motion a series of events that provided the momentum for early church growth and the immigration of Italian converts to Utah before the mission was closed in 1867 and subsequently reopened in 1966. In the past half century since then, the Mormons have gradually established a small but enduring presence in the Italian *piazza*—the public

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*Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 199–220, and James K. Lyon, “Mormonism and Islam through the Eyes of a ‘Universal Historian,’” *BYU Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 221–36.

4. Shepherd and Shepherd, *Mormon Passage*, 1.

5. Rodney Stark, “Preface,” and “The Basis of Mormon Success,” in *The Rise of Mormonism*, ed. Reid L. Neilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), ix, 114–38; and Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 1 (September 1984): 18, 25–26. For a critique of Stark’s controversial growth projections, see Lowell C. Bennion and Lawrence A. Young, “The Uncertain Dynamics of LDS Expansion, 1950–2020,” *Dialogue* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 8–32, and Stark’s article affirming his original thesis, “Modernization and Mormon Growth: The Secularization Thesis Revisited,” in *Contemporary Mormonism: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Marie Cornwall, Tim B. Heaton, and Lawrence A. Young (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994): 13–23.

square found in cities throughout Italy that lies, literally and figuratively, at the center of civic life.

A comprehensive account and thorough analysis of the people, events, and issues related to this important chapter in church history have never been published. Our research seeks to fill this gap in the literature by presenting historical information and analysis concerning the growth of Mormonism in Italy, issues surrounding the internationalization of the church, the emergence of new religious movements in Europe's evolving religious marketplace, and conversion and retention in faith communities that aggressively pursue missionary outreach.

The aim of this study is twofold: to tell the story of the rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Italy in order to shed light on the doctrines, strategies, methods, and challenges associated with its mission; and to understand more clearly the formation, consolidation, and expansion of new religious movements. The following are among the questions we explore: How is it that a religion born in the Protestant frontiers of nineteenth-century America is transplanted and takes root in the Catholic soil of modern Italy? What are the social, political, economic, and religious factors that have facilitated or inhibited the growth of the church in Italy? Why have Italian converts both embraced and struggled to adjust to a Mormon way of life, and how has the church adapted to suit the Italian context? In what ways has Mormon missionary work evolved over time in response to the circumstances of a world in constant flux?

Although there has been much written about LDS missiology, this volume seeks to contribute to the literature on Mormonism by addressing a number of issues: (1) In Italy, serious academic study on the topic of Mormonism is scarce, even though there is a rich literature about the Italian religious economy. (2) Mission histories often focus on the perspective of American missionaries while treating lightly the local setting and the insights to be gained

by examining the personal experience of the converts themselves. (3) There is a dearth of research about the strategies, methods, and challenges of missions since the mid-twentieth century. (4) Only a small number of studies have provided a comprehensive historical perspective, examining issues such as organization, policies, immigration, and conversion/retention over an extensive time period in order to understand how Mormon evangelization has changed and evolved.<sup>6</sup> (5) Finally, few histories place the growth of the church in a broader context of missiology and new religious movements, trying to shed added light on the process of conflict, change, and accommodation that characterizes the establishment of fledgling belief systems and leads to the rise of new world religions.

To these ends, all information and analysis presented is grounded in primary source material: original documents, journals, diaries, autobiographies, correspondence, interviews, newspaper articles, and mission reports. We have relied heavily on material that reflects the perspectives, attitudes, insights, and ideas of Italian church members, scholars, and informed observers in order to illuminate what the church experience has been for the Italians and to understand local conditions that shape those experiences for members, leaders, and missionaries. Archival and Italian language materials thus form a major component of the data gathered and analyzed. The result is a familiar story seen from a very different perspective.

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6. Some previous comprehensive studies include F. LaMond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1987); Marjorie Newton, *Southern Cross Saints: The Mormons in Australia*, Mormons in the Pacific Series (Laie, Hawaii: Institute for Polynesian Studies, Brigham Young University-Hawaii, 1991); Rodolfo Acevedo, *Los Mormones en Chile* (Santiago, Chile: Impresos y Publicaciones Cumora, 1991); R. Lanier Britsch, *From the East: The History of the Latter-day Saints in Asia, 1851-1996* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998); and Christian Euvrard, "Socio-Histoire du Mormonisme en France (1850-2008)" (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Etudes, 2008).

This volume highlights the human drama associated with the encounters between foreign missionaries and local spiritual seekers, discussing the tensions and adjustments that result at both the individual and institutional levels and exploring the implications of religious growth across obstacles of faith, geography, and culture. Our overall argument is that Mormonism's trajectory of change from an obscure spiritual movement into an international faith community—like that of other new religions—has emerged from a complex interplay of historical forces, political imperatives, socioeconomic conditions, intrinsic spiritual appeal, capacity for redefinition and renewal, and religious proclivities of church members and potential converts.

Chapters 1 through 4 recount the story of the opening of the Italian Mission in 1850 through its close in 1867. Chapter 5 discusses how Italian converts emigrated to Mormon settlements during the nineteenth century and integrated into a new society. Chapters 6 and 7 survey the periodic presence of Mormons in Italy after 1867 and the events leading up to the reopening of a new Italian Mission almost one hundred years later. Chapters 8 through 15 examine the history of the new twentieth-century mission even as Mormonism in Italy entered the twenty-first century.

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