

LEADERSHIP, RETENTION, AND US CULTURE IN THE LDS CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA AND EUROPE

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a global church based in the United States. The cultural context of the Church as a top-down, global entity with centralized leadership necessarily interacts with local cultural contexts in complex ways. Many have pointed out ways that US culture serves to attract and retain converts. This article explores one aspect of this cultural exchange in the form of leadership culture. Examples from Europe and Latin America demonstrate that US leadership culture plays a significant role in defining LDS culture in these contexts. New data demonstrates that the local leadership in these regions reflects particular class interests. These aspects of US leadership culture are manifestations of a US colonial legacy. This article further suggests that US leadership culture actually serves as a factor in low retention rates of recent converts.¹

Since the 1960s, Latter-day Saint Church organization is characterized by correlation, standardization, and centralized control. This centralization of leadership means that decisions about content and tone of Church services and culture are often made outside of a local context. Church leaders have acknowledged this tension and attempted

1. An earlier version of half of this article was presented at the annual meeting of the Global Mormon Studies conference in Coventry, England, on Mar. 23, 2022. Thanks to John Hawkins, Ross Martin, Matt Martinic, Taylor Petrey, and especially two or three anonymous peer reviewers for their critical comments that helped to substantially improve this article.

to theorize it in a variety of ways. One way has been to emphasize harmony between Church culture and local culture, especially in European contexts. For instance, in a 1976 General Conference talk, Belgian Elder Charles Didier described the “gospel culture” as a kind of universal that held Latter-day Saints together throughout the world. He defined it as “a vast amalgam of all the positive aspects of our cultures, histories, customs, and languages. The building of the Kingdom of God is such an amalgam, and is the only place where these different values may and can coexist.”²

The concept of a universal gospel culture that transcends any particular culture, and thus may not be reduced to American culture, has become a guiding ideal in LDS discourse. In several talks, Elder Dallin Oaks attempted to define a gospel culture that is independent from any culture in the world, because it derives from God’s plan of salvation and outlines the “values and expectations and practices common to all members of the Church.” Oaks’s General Conference talk “Give Thanks in All Things” described gospel culture as “commandments, covenants, ordinances, and blessings” as expressed, for example, by the principles in the key LDS text “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”³

Scholars have criticized this idea of a transcendent gospel culture as vacuous. It leaves in place a structure of an American organization that gets to define the parameters of what is most essential to the faith. Gina Colvin has argued, “The way Mormonism is popularly practiced at the metropole and transplanted around the world places the moral/legal (i.e., attention to rules and behavior) above the relational aspects of Christianity (i.e., attention to God’s relationship with us, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with the earth).”⁴ Ryan

2. Charles Didier, “I Have a Question,” *Ensign* 6, no. 6, June 1976, 62.

3. Dallin H. Oaks, “Give Thanks in All Things,” *Ensign* 33, no. 5, May 2003, 95.

4. Gina Colvin, “There’s No Such Thing as a Gospel Culture,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 59. Colvin wonders why drinking tea should get your temple recommend revoked automatically whereas espousing white supremacist ideas in Sunday School would not.

Cragun concurs that Church leaders are ill-equipped here: “Leaders of the LDS Church describe the Utah-based, white, middle-class American culture they advocate not as monoculturalism but as ‘gospel culture.’”⁵ The Dutch cultural anthropologist Walter van Beek criticized gospel culture as an “ideal culture” that has “no content.” He explains:

Because in the current LDS arrangement, gospel culture, whatever Oaks intends it to mean, will never be allowed to stray too far from the Deseret patterns, and this example is quite different in cultural form. The fact is that no cultural variety in worship is allowed at all. African LDS wards are not allowed to play drums, may not dance and clap, and may not even sing the typical African exchange songs between men and women. The LDS choice for organ and piano has nothing to do with any gospel principle but everything to do with the Puritan heritage of the Restoration.⁶

Van Beek deftly analyzed the relationship between the domestic Church and the international Church as “a clear *hierarchy between colonizer and colonized*,” expressed in “uncritical adoption of the colonizer’s culture, view of the colony as an area to be developed, inequality in financial and personnel exchange, unequal distribution of relevant knowledge etc.”⁷

5. Ryan Cragun, “Summing Up: Problems and Prospects for a Global Church in the Twenty-First Century,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Gary Shepherd, and Ryan T. Cragun (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 821.

6. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Church Unity and the Challenge of Cultural Diversity: A View from across the Sahara,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Patrick Q. Mason (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 88. In December 2021, the LDS Church updated its *General Handbook* worship guidelines, allowing for the first time more diversity in instrument use, even including drums (see www.thisweekinmormons.com/2021/12/brass-instruments-are-no-longer-forbidden-in-sacrament-meeting/).

7. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Mormon Europeans or European Mormons? An ‘Afro-European’ View on Religious Colonization,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 13. Emphasis mine.

Moreover, administrative centralization has only increased in recent decades, with the hegemonic Salt Lake City headquarters assuming total control of manuals, textbooks, scriptures, translations, and websites worldwide. Van Beek earlier made a bold plea to decentralize the production of Church manuals, which would allow the Church in European countries to produce their own manuals and make them more relevant to their own cultures. He noted that the US manuals did not always work well in European countries: “For Europeans, the Utah church seems overly-focused on sex-related problems, ignoring problems of violence, pollution, and poverty.”⁸

This article explores one aspect of US culture on the global Church in detail and considers its impact in local contexts of Latin America and Europe: the Church’s adoption of US corporate culture, in terms of dress, values, bodily comportment, and class allegiance. The heavy US impact on LDS Church culture and leadership has been both a blessing and a curse. It appealed to many (potential) new members who were attracted to the United States and its culture, for example, in countries like Costa Rica and Guatemala. Brigham Young University (BYU) librarian and historian Mark Grover reported that in earlier years, the LDS Church used its US connection to its advantage in Latin American countries, with the missionaries even offering free English classes.⁹ Yet at the same time, the strong US flavor of the Church contributed to eventually driving many people away—likely including some who were originally attracted to the Church for this reason. The low retention rates of the Church outside the United States are not only due to premature baptizing by missionaries and insufficient preparation of the

8. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Ethnization and Accommodation: Dutch Mormons in Twenty-First Century Europe,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 137.

9. Mark L. Grover, “Mormons in Latin America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, edited by Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 523.

new members. I theorize that the strongly US-flavored culture of the Church and its leadership, both locally and globally, is causing many defections from Mormonism and keeping the retention rates in most European and Latin American countries in the 10 to 25 percent range.

Corporate Culture and Local Leadership

There are several reasons why the global Church has adopted US corporate culture. With respect to leadership styles, Belgian American scholar Wilfried Decoo identified four reasons that US leadership styles are so hegemonic: *historical location* (meaning that the early history of the Church took place in the United States in the nineteenth century); *authority* (meaning that the highest leadership is almost exclusively North American); “an American *ideology* of optimism, assertiveness, and personal achievement” (*individualism*); and, possibly most importantly, expected *behavior* based on prior socialization.¹⁰ These all affect how US leadership creates certain outcomes in the global Church.

The influence of US culture on global LDS culture is not one of passive acceptance. Decoo also analyzed four different approaches that LDS Church leaders have taken to the relationship between gospel culture and the surrounding culture of a country outside the United States. The first is *antagonistic*, based on a strong dualism, “with good located in the Mormon community and evil in the outside world.”¹¹ The second is *appreciation* of other cultures and a spirit of conciliation with other religions. The third sees gospel culture “as an *addition* to the good found in the prevailing culture. . . . A parallel mode, which we might call *subtractive*, is to invite people to adopt the gospel in full and then erase from their original backgrounds what is incompatible.

10. Wilfried Decoo, “Expanding Research for the Expanding International Church,” in *Directions for Mormon Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Patrick Q. Mason (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 102–106.

11. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 110.

. . . The approach requires members to actively assess what they must cut from their local cultures.”¹² Decoo identified as the main underlying principle of these approaches the idea that “the gospel shapes a desirable identity.” The gospel does not tell members how to do this, and neither does the Church. However, the Church does offer its own dominant Church culture, which is strongly shaped by US culture.

There are several instances of an antagonistic relationship between LDS US culture and local cultures. For instance, sometimes the LDS Church leadership takes an unequivocal direct stand against certain African cultural practices. One such example of institutional ethnocentrism is *bridewealth* or *lobola*, which Oaks singled out as a “negative cultural tradition” in his address to the African Church leadership in November 2010. Bridewealth involves elaborate gifts in money or cattle from the groom’s family to the bride’s family. Van Beek reported that Oaks objected to it because “it delays marriage for returned missionaries and as such presents a moral hazard. He went on to warn against excessive debts incurred by weddings and funerals. . . . From Elders Oaks’ ecclesiastical standpoint the critique is all-too-easy: all activities that impinge on the present Deseret model of membership are condemned.”¹³ Van Beek countered this by presenting the conventional anthropological analysis of bridewealth as a gift exchange to start and consolidate bonds between in-laws. Oaks condemning this practice is an example of ethnocentrism (although van Beek avoids this term) and hegemony: African cultural practices are reviewed, assessed negatively, and rejected whereas US cultural practices rarely are. Van Beek elaborated his criticism with a strong counterexample:

As a socially approved form of investment, the institution of bride-wealth can be compared to American higher education. Americans spend large sums on college education. Parents go into deep debt for

12. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 110–111.

13. Van Beek, “Church Unity,” 78.

their children's education, even taking another mortgage on their house, or the students themselves take on expensive loans. . . . These debts can surely be a major burden on individuals and families, but I have yet to hear the first critique of the practice from the LDS Church leadership, let alone under the rubric of "gospel culture." . . . Clearly, the African cultural equation runs differently than the North Atlantic one, which is based upon individualism, achievement, and the separation of the three forms of capital (economic, social, and symbolic).¹⁴

In this case and others, the dominant everyday culture (Decoo prefers the term *socialization*) of the LDS Church is strongly influenced by mainstream (nonreligious) US culture.

These issues are particularly acute with respect to corporate culture. For instance, what is labeled "gospel culture" is often just North American business culture. Decoo explains:

It carries a number of characteristics that seem part of an outward Mormon identity: intense personal contact, greeting each other by the name (often the first name), shaking hands firmly and somewhat longer, with a smile and eye contact; the way to hug another adult; the facial demonstration of assertiveness and commitment; the easiness of social contact between different genders and different ages; a certain looseness in conducting meetings, with moments of humor and a casual speaking style from the pulpit; the use of superlatives, extolling others as "wonderful" and "great," praising each child or youngster as "special." *These behavioral patterns seem trivial to Americans because they have them ingrained.* But in other cultures, some of these patterns stand out as different and often as "American."¹⁵

Decoo gives a striking example here. He had recommended a Congolese brother for a calling in the Belgium mission office, but the "spirit of discernment" of the mission president caused him to reject the candidate. "There is a problem when someone avoids eye contact and gives a weak handshake," the mission president explained. What the

14. Van Beek, "Church Unity," 89.

15. Decoo, "Expanding Research," 104–105. Emphasis mine.

US mission president failed to realize was that in Congo, “as in many cultures around the world, such behavior is a sign of deference and meekness, rather than personal weakness or a lack of social or spiritual capacity.”¹⁶ This is a textbook example of ethnocentrism.

The corporate culture of Church leadership has become closely associated with the faith itself. Decoo recognizes that “many Mormons abroad appreciate this homogeneous and efficient business approach.”¹⁷ In fact, it must be acknowledged that this constitutes one of the Church’s major pull factors in some parts of Europe and Latin America. At the same time, this can also be a source of tension. He explains, “Occasionally we hear members abroad complain that the Church is ‘too American.’ That pertains mostly to a corporate, managerial style of doing things—using quantitative goals, charts, report forms, etc.—which does not square with their understanding of religion as an affective and spiritual realm. Moreover, to strengthen this impression, there is the tendency to call as stake and regional leaders, and hire as Church employees, members who seem most fit, by personality, profession, and dress, to blend in the American corporate style.”¹⁸

This leadership style wields extraordinary influence over the global Church. In his analysis of the Church in Africa, van Beek has previously identified the *corporate culture* that is dominant throughout the Church worldwide as indicative of headquarters hegemony. Examples include frequent separation of the sexes in meetings, a uniform dress code freezing “an outdated clothing fashion that once was in vogue in corporate America,” and publicizing US cultural heroes in Pioneer Celebrations rather than allowing international members to celebrate their own cultural heritage and heroes. He also lists examples such as “job rotation, the insistence on efficient meetings and some interpersonal

16. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 104.

17. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 105.

18. Decoo, “Expanding Research,” 105.

formalities vis a vis office holders, the style of reporting on stewardship, and the deference to authority.”¹⁹ These are not neutral, but represent specific cultural values that often conflict in local contents. He notes, for instance, that “job rotation does not at all fit in the cultural definitions of power in Africa,” because “African cultures see power not as an incidental attribute but as a personality characteristic.”²⁰ As a result, former branch presidents, bishops, and stake presidents in African countries frequently become inactive after their fixed-time term ends. The same thing happens in Mexico.²¹ This demonstrates that US cultural practices in the LDS Church can directly contribute to member retention problems elsewhere in the world.

I reviewed a selection of relevant scholarly literature on local Mormon leaders.²² Much literature is historical and focuses on Church presidents and the Quorums of Twelve and Seventy.²³ It turns out that there is a long history of LDS preference for corporate leaders. An early article from 1967 emphasized the need for professional executive abilities in leading a US stake: “Local Church authorities have long recognized the value of using other professionally trained experts such as

19. Van Beek, “Mormon Europeans or European Mormons?,” 22–23.

20. Van Beek, “Church Unity,” 74. Note that this traditional African leadership model is similar to personalism in Latin America.

21. Rex E. Cooper and Moroni Spencer Hernández de Olarte, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mexico,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism*, edited by Gordon Shepherd, Gary Shepherd, and Ryan T. Cragun (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 386.

22. The scarce literature on LDS leadership is acknowledged multiple times by Kevin D. Whitehead in his PhD dissertation, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Its Educational System” (Utah State University, 2018), e.g., 22–23, 58, 68.

23. See, for example, David J. Whittaker and Arnold K. Garr, eds., *A Firm Foundation: Church Organization and Administration* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting many literature references on Mormon leadership.

lawyers, accountants, businessmen, physicians, skilled craftsmen, and musicians where their talents are useful.”²⁴

The corporate culture that LDS leaders adopted reflected specifically American values. For instance, in European contexts, there were actually tensions between French business culture and Church culture. C. Brooklynn Derr, a BYU professor of management, studied LDS and non-LDS business executives in France in 1985, noting that local Church leaders operated in a complicated forcefield of three competing cultures: French national culture, French LDS culture, and (US) LDS culture. The hierarchical power pyramid in the LDS Church was similar to the French business firm, but many of the latter’s socializing rituals (for example, the long business lunch) were undermined by the Word of Wisdom prohibiting wine and coffee for members. Derr concluded that “the constraints of both cultures (French and Latter-day Saint) might cause French Mormons to adopt a more extreme, less flexible lifestyle.”²⁵

US cultural preferences also manifested in Latin American missionary efforts in these decades. Working as a missionary in Bolivia in 1974–1976, David Knowlton was “actively encouraged to convert ‘leaders,’ . . . [for example,] we focused on middle-class and upper-middle-class men: their education and cultural traditions fit them easily into the Mormon concept of leader and gave them the leadership qualities necessary in the Church’s bureaucratic system.” This preference also marked certain people as undesirable: “Missionaries were also strongly discouraged from working with Quechua-speaking villagers,

24. Kendall O. Price and Kent Lloyd, “New Approaches to Church Executive Leadership: Behavioral Science Perspectives,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 2, no. 4 (1967): 49. Note that the skilled craftsmen they identified in 1967 were mostly gone among stake presidents more recently, and musicians are completely absent.

25. C. Brooklynn Derr, “Messages from Two Cultures: Mormon Leaders in France, 1985,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 21, no. 2 (1988): 109.

who constituted 35% of the nation's population, unless they came to the city."²⁶

As Church leaders sought locals who belonged to their class to join the Church, they cultivated them to take on local leadership. Knowlton observed that "Mormonism requires a commitment of a significant portion of one's time to Church service and a sufficient education in the culture of management to be able to perform according to Church practices. Thus we should not be surprised that Church leadership tends to be drawn from relatively narrow social circles. . . . Virtually none of the leaders come from the laboring classes that make up the majority of Latin America's workforce. Even in those stakes in heavily working-class areas, there appears to be a preference for leaders from the management sectors."²⁷

These leadership preferences are often conflated with divine authorization and authority. This creates certain risks. Knowlton argues that Mormonism has "sanctified" the leadership structure itself, since "Mormon central leadership sees itself as sanctioned by its proximity to God and as authorized to act in His name." However, "as in the case of all power or authority, its functioning depends socially on the acceptance of its legitimacy by local members of the Church."²⁸

Others have pointed out how a corporate managerial class of leaders creates tensions and divisions in Latin American churches. In 1995, sociologist Marcus Martins conducted a survey of 190 and in-depth interviews with 17 former Church leaders (mostly bishops, stake

26. David Knowlton, "Thoughts on Mormonism in Latin America," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25, no. 2 (1992): 49–50.

27. David Knowlton, "Mormonism in Latin America: Towards the Twenty-first Century," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (1996): 172.

28. David Knowlton, "Hands Raised Up: Corruption, Power, and Context in Bolivian Mormonism," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 4 (2007): 62.

presidents, and area representatives) in Brazil. His informants stressed the importance of interpersonal skills for local LDS leaders: especially humility (44 percent), love (41 percent), and patience (20 percent).²⁹ Main leadership flaws they identified were pride (36 percent), lack of delegation (18 percent), impatience (11 percent), not listening (11 percent), arrogance (11 percent), and authoritarianism (8 percent).³⁰ Class was another factor. Most older members in Brazil were middle class, whereas the newer members tended to be low-educated and poor. Martins personally observed how this could lead to a “split congregation.” The wealthier members occupied the first two rows and all leadership positions, whereas poorer-dressed members sat at the back, some “facing the floor, as if ashamed. After the meeting some of the old-timers expressed their desire for the division of the ward and the creation of a branch for ‘those people.’”³¹ Martins warned: “*In order to avoid the disintegration of local LDS communities the LDS Church must be on the watch against the formation of a ‘managerial-ecclesiastical elite’ detached from the people and unconcerned with their needs.*”³²

Other studies of non-LDS leaders confirm that local Church leadership in Latin America is perceived as a barrier for many newer converts. A 2017 article on the Catholic diocese of Ambato, Ecuador, analyzed the impact of the religious leader’s behavior on his

29. Marcus H. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited: Brazilian LDS Leaders’ Insights on the Growth of the Church in Brazil” (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1996), 99–100, 167–168.

30. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited,” 101–102.

31. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited,” 158–159.

32. Martins, “The Oak Tree Revisited,” 159. Emphasis mine.

congregation.³³ The study concluded that parishioners turned off, dropped out, or became apathetic when their leaders were too materialist, indifferent, close-minded, overly involved in (new) media technologies, bogged down in scandals, making arbitrary decisions, abusing their authority, lacking in dynamism, and making exaggerated demands on their congregants. Believers stressed the importance of the following qualities in their religious leaders: service leadership, theological knowledge, spiritual guideship, and being open to dialogue (i.e., confident, enthusiastic, respectful, communicative, humble, generous, with a strong testimony).³⁴

The 2018 dissertation of education scholar Kevin D. Whitehead from Utah State University offers a historical analysis of leadership theories in the LDS Church, based on official Church texts, speeches, and handbooks.³⁵ LDS leadership theory showed remarkable consistency from 1900 to 2017 in the desired qualities of leaders: love, persuasiveness, honesty, humility, confidence, righteousness, commitment, and compassion.³⁶ The enduring LDS leadership themes were likewise consistent over a century: an emphasis on developing leaders among all members as accountable agents who organize and lead like Christ and counsel together in participatory councils on the basis of vision, purpose, personal revelation, and inspiration from the Holy Ghost, with the ultimate goals of strengthening families and bringing people

33. Patricio Valverde Gavilanes, Enma Leiva Sánchez, Blanca Oñate Sánchez, and René Ayala Guamangate, “Comportamiento del líder religioso y su influencia en la actuación de los feligreses” [Conduct of the religious leader and its influence on the behavior of the congregation], in I Congreso de Ciencia, Sociedad e Investigación Universitaria, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador Ambato, 2017, accessed July 1, 2022, available at repositorio.pucesa.edu.ec/bitstream/123456789/2096/2/Comportamiento%20del%20L%C3%ADDER%20Religioso.pdf.

34. Valverde Gavilanes et al., “Comportamiento del líder religioso,” 7–8.

35. Kevin D. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory.”

36. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 214–215.

to salvation.³⁷ Leaders should be self-motivated problem-solvers and willing to be lifelong learners who can learn from their past mistakes. LDS Church President Monson explicitly warned them: “Never let a problem to be solved become more important than a person to be loved.”³⁸ Whitehead’s systematic content allows him to trace changes and historical patterns, such as the evolution from more hierarchical LDS Church committees in the first half of the twentieth century to the more participatory councils from the 1970s to 2017.³⁹

The local LDS Church leadership impacted the Church’s dominant culture in at least two direct ways. First, the leadership (both local and global) organized and controlled the organigram: the hierarchical administrative connections between the different levels that ensured the smooth functioning of the Church operation. Second, the local leadership defined the operational parameters of Church culture through its daily interactions between leaders on the one hand and between leaders and members on the other. Both content and tone in the local leadership of the Mormon Church were heavily impacted by a dominant US corporate culture. This was particularly true of the US managerial-style culture that has dominated the Church leadership culture in local units across the world since at least the correlation changes of the 1960s.

Background and Performance of Mormon Leaders in Latin America and Europe

Given the importance of local leaders in (1) mediating between US Church leadership and local membership and (2) playing a role in defining Church culture for new converts, further empirical analysis of their status and their practices seems warranted. This article contributes

37. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 211–213.

38. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 222. The quote is from President Thomas Monson, “Love at Home,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2011, 4.

39. Whitehead, “Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory,” 240.

further information about local leaders in Europe and Latin America based on new data.

Previously, only one survey on the socioeconomic backgrounds of local LDS leaders in South America had been performed. Knowlton provided a fascinating overview of the occupations of stake presidents and their counselors in 1986 and in 1993–1994.⁴⁰ A relatively high number (13 percent) were Church employees in both city and country, but most by far were business professionals: 36 percent of the sample across Chile and 33 percent in Santiago alone. In Latin America as a whole, however, business professionals made up 50 percent, so Chile scored significantly lower. Merchants made up 11 percent in Chile and 20 percent in Santiago, whereas technicians were 10 percent in Chile and 9 percent in Santiago.

The demographics of LDS leaders in Chile in these years were significantly different from the general membership. Forty-five percent of Chilean LDS members in 1986 were workers or unemployed, 26 percent were lower-middle class, and only 15 percent were professionals.⁴¹ In the 1982 census, LDS members in Santiago were overwhelmingly located in the poorer neighborhoods (*comunas*) in the north (32 percent of all chapel buildings) and south (another 32 percent), with only 20 percent in the west and 21 percent in the center and east.⁴² Knowlton concluded that the Church “celebrates business and bourgeois values and society,” summarizing that “the [LDS] Church in [poor] neighborhoods is much more successful at attracting the minority of residents who claim white-collar status, and these are more likely to be represented among the Church’s leadership than are blue-collar workers,

40. David C. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” in *Mormon Identities in Transition*, edited by Douglas Davies (London: Cassell, 1996), 73.

41. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” 71.

42. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” 72.

even though they are the largest single sector of the adult male membership and even more the largest sector of the neighborhoods.”⁴³

The present article contributes to this information by providing an updated survey of LDS leadership demographics. Knowlton’s study of South America, especially Chilean leaders and members, is more than three decades old and only covered one year. I conducted an update of Knowlton’s study of the occupations of stake presidents and their counselors in Chile, employing the same general categories. Using the online version of the *LDS Church News* for 2000–2019,⁴⁴ I collected data for Chile (table 1) and all countries in Central America (table 2). I also compared this research to data on European Church leaders. For Europe, I collected data from 2000–2019 on the occupations of stake presidents and their counselors in Belgium and the Netherlands (table 3), referenced by Decoo and van Beek. A comparison faces some limitations. Total case numbers are low for Belgium and the Netherlands ($N = 21$ for the Netherlands; $N = 15$ for Belgium), although the total for Central America is strong ($N = 227$) and for Chile respectable ($N = 43$). Even allowing for sample size differences, some continuities and similarities in the distributions of occupations are surprising, especially in the case of Chile.

The new data for Chile, Central America, and Europe show that the local LDS leaders display a great deal of homogeneity and preference for corporate leadership. Chile continues to have a relatively high number of stake presidents and counselors who are Church employees: 16 percent—against 8 percent in Central America and 13 percent in Belgium (0 in the Netherlands). Professionals in Chile are now much lower than the 36 percent in 1993–1994: 16 percent—against only 6 percent in Central America. By comparison, there are 0 in Belgium, and 14 percent in the Netherlands. By far the biggest groups in *all* countries

43. Knowlton, “Mormonism in Chile,” 74.

44. See <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>. Accessed on June 11, 2021.

Table 1: Occupations of stake presidencies in Chile, 2000-2019

	N	%
Business employees	8	19%
Church employee	7	16%
Professionals	7	16%
Small business owners	6	14%
Business administration	5	12%
Technicians	4	9%
Educators	3	7%
Government employees	1	2%
Unskilled labor	1	2%
Professional military	1	2%
Merchants	0	0
Farmers	0	0
Others	0	0
Totals	43	100%

Source: *Church News*, various editions, 2000-2019, accessed March 10 and 11, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>.

are now business administrators (12 percent Chile, 17.5 percent Central America, 19 percent Netherlands, and 27 percent Belgium) and business employees (19 percent Chile, 17 percent Central America, 38 percent Netherlands and 20 percent Belgium). These high percentages reflect the continued importance of the corporate world for local LDS lay leadership.

Other careers with administrative skill sets are also highly represented. The self-employed category of small business owners is very similar in Chile, Belgium, and the Netherlands (14, 13 and 10 percent respectively) but significantly higher in Central America at 23 percent (reflected in my research on the LDS Church in Costa Rica and Guatemala). The only other important category is technicians, ranging from 9 to 12 percent in Chile and Central America and 5 to 7 percent in the Netherlands and Belgium. Surprisingly, merchants have entirely

Table 2: Occupations of stake presidencies in Central America, 2000–2019

	N	%
Small business owners	52	23%
Business administration	40	17.5%
Business employees	39	17%
Technicians	27	12%
Church employee	18	8%
Educators	18	8%
Professionals	13	6%
Unskilled labor	9	4%
Government employees	6	2.5%
Merchants	3	1.5%
Professional military	1	0.5%
Others	1	0.5%
Farmers	0	0
Totals	227	100%

Source: *Church News*, various editions, 2000-2019, accessed March 10 and 11, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>.

disappeared in the stake presidencies of Chile, even though they were 11 percent in 1993–1994. Educators are a modest group everywhere: 7 percent in Chile, 8 percent in Central America, 7 percent in Belgium, and 5 percent in the Netherlands. Government employees are the smallest group, ranging from 2 percent in Chile, 2.5 percent in Central America, 5 percent in the Netherlands, and 7 percent in Belgium. The military make up 1 case each in Chile and Central America and 0 in Belgium and the Netherlands. Farmers are absent everywhere, except for 1 case in the Netherlands (5 percent). Unskilled labor is totally absent in Belgium and the Netherlands, present in 1 case in Chile (2 percent), but makes up 9 cases (4 percent) in Central America.

Part of the reason there is an overrepresentation of these classes of men in leadership roles is because of the unpaid nature of Church

Table 3: Occupations of stake presidencies in the Netherlands and Belgium, 2000–2019

	Netherlands <i>N</i> (%)	Belgium <i>N</i> (%)	Totals
Business employees	8 (38%)	3 (20%)	11 (31%)
Business administration	4 (19%)	4 (27%)	8 (22%)
Small business owners	2 (10%)	2 (13%)	4 (11%)
Professionals	3 (14%)	0 (0)	3 (8%)
Church employee	0 (0)	2 (13%)	2 (6%)
Government employees	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	2 (6%)
Educators	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	2 (6%)
Technicians	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	2 (6%)
Merchants	0 (0)	1 (7%)	1 (3%)
Farmers	1 (5%)	0 (0)	1 (3%)
Professional military	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Unskilled labor	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Others	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Totals	21 (100%)	15 (100%)	36 (100%)

Source: *Church News*, various editions, 2000-2019, accessed March 10 and 11, 2020, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/>.

service. In my previous fieldwork, I noted these problems in Guatemala and Nicaragua: “Rotating, unpaid leadership positions did not function well in a situation of poverty and little formal education. Bishops and stake presidents were unable to imitate the US managerial leadership model. Many bishops wanted to control everything themselves because they felt they could not rely on (passive) ward members. The *caudillo* (charismatic warlord) then became the leadership model instead of the corporate manager. This, in turn, made the rank-and-file members even more passive.”⁴⁵ Rather than efficiency, the cultural management

45. Henri Gooren, “Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala: Report from a Barrio,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 114.

styles here tended to reward authoritarian leadership that alienated others. It made leaders more likely to (ab)use their power to pressure other members, who often felt insulted and became inactive.

US LDS leadership models often conflicted with Latin American leadership models. Researchers Cooper and Hernández de Olarte have explored how LDS bureaucratic and hierarchical structure functions in these contexts. In Mexico, and in most of Latin America, they note that the traditional style of leadership, *personalism*, “is based on either on a bond of friendship or on the leader’s ability to bestow favors on the follower. The leader consequently has difficulty maintaining control over followers with whom he cannot maintain personal ties. In contrast to traditional Mexican personalism, the LDS Church official leadership style is more impersonal and bureaucratic, such as that which is typically found in a US corporation.”⁴⁶ Few local leaders in Mexico were able to emulate the US corporate leadership model.

The result of gathering fresh data on the backgrounds of LDS leaders in Central America, Chile, Belgium, and the Netherlands is that it demonstrates the *continuity* of the LDS Church’s standards for leadership recruitment. Stake presidents and their counselors are still overwhelmingly recruited from a background as (small) business owners, business administrators, business employees, and professionals. These categories combined made up 81 percent in Chile 1993–1994, compared to 61 percent in Chile, 64 percent in Central America, 60 percent in Belgium, and 81 percent in the Netherlands in 2000–2019. Church employees, the other main group, made up 13 percent in Chile 1993–1994 against 16 percent in Chile, 8 percent in Central America, and 13 percent in Belgium in 2000–2019; surprisingly, Church employees made up 0 in the Netherlands in 2000–2019.

46. Cooper and Hernández de Olarte, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mexico,” 385.

Leadership, Growth, and Retention: The Country Church Growth Assessment Protocol

This article is interested in assessing the effect of US corporate culture in local LDS Church leadership in Latin America and Europe on Church growth and retention. I analyze LDS Church growth using a model I developed earlier. The country church growth assessment protocol analyzes church growth at country level as the result of four religious and four nonreligious factors, which can be both internal and external to the church under study (see figure 1). The internal religious factors are (1a) appeal of the doctrine and (1b) evangelization activities; the internal nonreligious factors are (1c) appeal of the church organization and (1d) natural growth and membership retention. The external religious factors are (2a) dissatisfaction with Catholicism and (2b) responses from the Catholic hierarchy to non-Catholic growth; the external nonreligious factors are (2c) appeal of competing secular organizations and (2d) social, economic, and/or psychological *anomie* as well as the urbanization process, which uproots people and presumably makes them more likely to join a new church.⁴⁷

Local Mormon leaders have an impact on all four internal factors, although their influence on the appeal of the Church's doctrine (1a) is obviously limited. Yet local leaders play a key role in the size and strength of evangelization and missionary activities (1b), the appeal of the organization to outsiders (1c), and, as previously mentioned, especially in natural growth and retention (1d). When members first start having doubts about key LDS doctrines, the reaction of leaders is key. If members lack a relationship of confidence with leaders, they will

47. Emilio Willems, *Followers of the New Faith: Culture Change and the Rise of Protestantism in Brazil and Chile* (Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1967); Bryan R. Roberts, "Protestant Groups and Coping with Urban Life in Guatemala," *American Journal of Sociology* 73, no. 6 (1968): 753-767; Christian Lalive d'Epinay, *Haven of the Masses: A Study of the Pentecostal Movement in Chile* (London: Lutterworth, 1969).

Figure 1: The new country church growth protocolⁱ

	(1) Internal factors	(2) External factors
Religious factors	1a Appeal of doctrine, rituals, code of conduct, morality, theology, mystical experiences, healing, tithing, liturgy	2a Dissatisfaction with doctrine, rituals, etc. of parental religion and other competing churches
	1b Evangelization events, activities, missionaries, public prayer/preaching	2b Evangelization events, activities, etc. of competing churches/leaders
Nonreligious factors	1c Appeal of the organization, skills, training, education, leaders, networks	2c Appeal of competing secular organizations, clubs, parties, etc.
	1d Natural growth, membership socialization and retention, membership demographics and generational effects	2d Urbanization process; social, economic, and/or psychological <i>anomie</i> (poverty, war, crime, etc.)

ⁱ Adapted, with extensive changes, from Henri Gooren, “Reconsidering Protestant Growth in Guatemala,” in *Holy Saints and Fiery Preachers: The Anthropology of Protestantism in Mexico and Central America*, edited by James W. Dow and Alan R. Sandstrom (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001), 177. The contents of the eight cells have all been expanded, and I develop a method to compare competing sources on church membership statistics.

likely not share their doubts and likely become less active. Some LDS programs target less-active members, but they require missionaries and local members to visit them and inquire about their motivations. Without a relationship of confidence, the true motivations for doubt and eventual disaffiliation will likely not be shared.

In Latin America, the typical new LDS member is a young woman—or a young family with small children—in her/their (early) twenties of (lower-) middle-class origin, living in the capital or another (main) city. Most wards have a majority of women who are active in church, but there is a limited number of male priesthood holders and leaders,

leading in part to the serious problem of failing leadership mentioned earlier.⁴⁸

It is important to understand why people join the Church to begin with. Bryant et al. summarized the multiple attractions of the Mormon Church to people in Latin America as follows:

Many people are attracted to Mormonism because of its organization radiating middle-class values, its strict code of conduct, its practical teachings (e.g., on raising children and household budgeting), its unique doctrine and spirituality, its style of worship and hymns, and its lay priesthood for men. Most people are recruited through their own social networks (LDS friends and relatives) or the missionaries. When specifically asked about main attraction factors, Guatemalan Mormons mentioned the strict code of conduct, learning new things in Church, feeling the joy of God's love, being blessed with miracles, and receiving support from fellow members.⁴⁹

This study suggests that the corporate culture values attracted members to join. But more analysis is needed here.

It is possible that certain pull factors gradually evolve into push factors. For instance, the LDS lifestyle (especially the Word of Wisdom prohibiting coffee, tobacco, and alcohol) is hard to maintain if one's family and friends—plus colleagues at work—all partake in these

48. Gooren, "Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Henri Gooren, "The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala, 1948–1998," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 34, no. 3 and 4 (Fall-Winter 2001): 55–75; Henri Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege: The Unique Experience of Nicaraguan Mormons," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 134–155.

49. Seth Bryant, Henri Gooren, Rick Phillips, and David Stewart Jr., "Conversion and Retention in Mormonism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, edited by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 769–770, based on multiple sources but especially Henri Gooren, *Rich among the Poor: Church, Firm, and Household among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs in Guatemala City* (Amsterdam: Thela, 1999), 2, 153, 155–156, 160–162, 166–169, 186.

substances. The lay priesthood for men and the many Church callings require much time, which is especially difficult for families with (young) children struggling to make ends meet. New members may also struggle to feel God's love and the blessing of miracles if they *don't* feel supported by their fellow members and leaders.

It may be possible to draw some correlations between growth rates in these regions and their relationship to local leadership styles. The main growth periods in Belgium and the Netherlands were 1960–1965 and in 1960–1980 respectively.⁵⁰ I also did extensive research on average annual Mormon growth rates in several Latin American countries concerning their main growth years.⁵¹ The most explosive growth in Central America occurred in the 1980s (Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Honduras) and 1990s (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua). In Nicaragua, a delayed growth explosion occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s because of Sandinista repression and harassment of Mormons between 1979 and 1990.

Most countries in Central America continued to have average annual growth rates of 10 to more than 20 percent in the 1980s and 1990s. Yet Mormon membership growth clearly started going down after 2000–2005. The average annual growth rate has been only 2 percent or lower for Belgium and the Netherlands since 1997, for Chile since 2000, for El Salvador since 2002 (although it was slightly up in 2007–2014), for Costa Rica also since 2002 (slightly up in 2010–2016),

50. See the cumorah.com country resources statistical profiles of Belgium and the Netherlands.

51. Gooren, "Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege"; Henri Gooren, "Comparing Mormon and Adventist Growth Patterns in Latin America: The Chilean Case," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 45–77.

for Guatemala since 2003 (slightly up in 2008–2014), for Panama since 2003, for Honduras since 2016, and for Nicaragua since only 2018.⁵²

LDS membership growth in the 1960s (Belgium, Netherlands, and Chile) and 1970s and 1980s (Central America) was correlated with a huge increase in Church resources (money, staff, missionaries, etc.) poured into the various regions. Clearly, at this time, the focus was on baptizing investigators as quickly as possible, without worrying whether or not they were sufficiently prepared to remain active in the Church. Demographic changes in these boom regions aided LDS growth, especially the baby boom population explosions following World War II in the United States and Europe and similar birth explosions across Latin America between the 1960s and 1990s. Anomie also played a role in stimulating LDS growth, especially in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s (political turmoil) and in the 1980s (political turmoil on top of a huge economic crisis). The combined effects of vastly increased LDS resources, anomie, and demographics produced the LDS membership explosions in these different regions in the 1960s–1980s. Yet these growth explosions could not be handled effectively by an underperforming local leadership—either in Latin America or in Belgium and the Netherlands. One main result of this was the very low retention rate of new members, hovering between 10 and 30 percent.

The low retention rates in these decades reflect the difference between all members on record (i.e., people who were born as Mormons and accepted the Church as children and people who converted to the Church at a later age) and the people who currently self-identify as Mormons. A 50 percent or lower member retention rate for the first year of new members was observed across Latin America from the late 1960s onward. Mark Grover, for example, reported that between 1968 and 1973, only 15 to 20 percent of newly baptized members in Brazil remained active, 30 to 35 percent became inactive Mormons, and half

52. The most convenient and up-to-date source of Mormon membership development is cumorah.com.

dropped out entirely and no longer considered themselves Mormons at all.⁵³ Retention rates in Costa Rica were 50 to 68 percent in 1990,⁵⁴ in Guatemala City 25 percent in 1995,⁵⁵ and in Managua, Nicaragua, 23 percent in 2005.⁵⁶

Already in these early decades, Church leaders were concerned about low retention rates. My 1991 master's research in Costa Rica explicitly addressed the problem of inactivity, noting campaigns in the Church to prevent the root causes of inactivity and to win back inactive members, for example through home visits. The Costa Rican mission president saw "a lack of integration on the group" as the root cause of inactivity: new members felt excluded because the veteran members seemed distant, uninterested, and not very helpful. However, investigators also underestimate the huge responsibilities that come from baptism. New members have a weak testimony and insufficient knowledge of key LDS doctrines. But the mission president also perceived "a lack of responsibility among Latins," who often struggle to fulfil the promises they make. Finally, certain personal crises may cause (temporary) inactivity: losing a job, family problems, and conflicts with local members and leaders.⁵⁷ My PhD research in Guatemala City likewise

53. Mark L. Grover, "Mormonism in Brazil: Religion and Dependency in Latin America" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1985), 37–39.

54. Henri Gooren, "De expanderende mormoonse kerk in Latijns Amerika: Schetsen van een wijk in San José, Costa Rica" [The Expanding Mormon Church in Latin America: Sketches from a Ward in San José, Costa Rica] (master's thesis, Utrecht University, 1991), 16. Membership data for First Ward (Barrio Uno [First Ward], Los Yoses, San José). In May 1990, the LDS Area Office in Guatemala City reported 330 members, but the bishopric listed 250. On Sunday, around 170 showed up.

55. Gooren, *Rich among the Poor*, 77.

56. Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege," 137, reported 46 percent retention, but only *half* of this number showed up in church every Sunday.

57. Gooren, "De expanderende mormoonse kerk," 34.

identified problems with other members and leaders as a main cause of inactivity and low retention of new converts.⁵⁸

LDS retention rates in Central America have continued to be low or have even *decreased* since the 1990s. For 2017, the *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions* gave Mormon retention rates of 15 to 20 percent for Mexico, 20 to 25 percent for Guatemala, 15 percent for El Salvador, 15 to 20 percent for Honduras, 10 to 15 percent for Nicaragua, 20 percent for Costa Rica, and 20 percent for Panama.⁵⁹ These extremely low Mormon retention rates in Central America suggest that many of the problems I identified in my earlier research in the region continue to the present day, constraining Mormon growth.

The situation in Central America is somewhat different from North America. Pew reported that 30 percent of US Mormons eventually leave the Church.⁶⁰ The literature identified main causes of inactivity and disaffiliation among the LDS in the United States. The root causes were family and work crises, burnout related to callings, and controversial feelings about LDS history (polygamy, Joseph Smith) and key LDS doctrines, for example regarding the primacy of marriage, traditional gender roles, homosexuality, the emphasis on obedience, and the lack of open intellectual debate. Many people who eventually disaffiliated described a long process of increasing doubts about doctrines as well as a keen awareness of “the high relational costs of exit.”⁶¹ Dropouts reported feeling “ostracized, lonely, lost, confused, and

58. Gooren, *Rich among the Poor*, 183–185.

59. Henri Gooren, ed., *Encyclopedia of Latin American Religions* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 1005, 1011, 1015, 1022, 1027, 1029, 1032. The retention rate is defined as the percentage of baptized members on official Church record that actually show up in church on a regular basis.

60. Pew Research Center, *Religious Landscape Study: USA* (Washington, D.C.: Pew, 2014).

61. Amorette Hinderaker and Amy O'Connor, “The Long Road Out: Exit Stories from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Communication Studies* 66, no. 5 (Nov.-Dec. 2015): 525.

sometimes guilty. Many reported the loss of important relationships or talked about a sense of strain in their relationships to parents, siblings, extended family members, or friends.”⁶² This is especially true if the dropouts were LDS by parental religion and if they lived in areas where the LDS Church formed a significant or even majority religion, such as Utah and the US Mountain West. Across Latin America, however, the LDS Church forms a minority religion, although there are now second and even third generation LDS, especially in Mexico, Brazil, and Chile (less so in Central America).

The situation in Europe also shows that problems with members and leaders, burnout, problems with key LDS doctrines, and premature baptizing by missionaries likewise contributed to low retention rates. Class has been a historical issue also, as well as conflict with the country’s culture. Decoo reported that retention in his Antwerp ward in 1969 was a mere 10 percent. Most inactive Belgian members were widowed or divorced, came from lower-socioeconomic classes, and lived in poor inner-city areas that Decoo had never entered before. He vividly described “agonizing stories of hostility in families, isolation from the cultural environment, persecution from outside the church and disillusionment within.”⁶³

The problems for retention in Belgium have shifted in more recent decades. Since the 1990s, most new LDS members in Belgium have been “legal and illegal aliens from Africa and Eastern Europe” with “marital, legal, financial and emotional problems” that put a huge burden on local leaders who were expected to help or counsel, but who were “themselves often weak and inexperienced,” thus often leading

62. Ines W. Jindra, “Deconversion from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Quest for Identity,” *Pastoral Psychology* 71, no. 3 (June 2022): 331.

63. Wilfried Decoo, “Feeding the Fleeting Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 97.

to burnout.⁶⁴ That is, the many problems resulting from low retention rates took an additional toll on the local leaders, especially bishops and stake presidents, which in turn increased the possibility of these leaders performing badly or even becoming inactive themselves.

The Netherlands shows similar trends. Walter van Beek reported a 28 percent retention for an average ward in the Netherlands in 2009.⁶⁵ He went on to analyze the typical disaffiliation patterns of the LDS members in depth: 20 to 30 percent were baptized as a child without any commitment to the Church, 5 to 10 percent received performative baptisms without any commitment, 16.5 percent were baptized because of strong rapport with a missionary only to drop out soon afterward, 20 to 30 percent were committed members for a time but dropped out after significant life changes (divorce, drug use, homosexuality), and the another one-sixth suffered from disenchantment (often following quarrels and doctrinal problems), were “overexposed” as children of leaders, or suffered from burnout as leaders themselves.

Van Beek also emphasized the main difference between the United States and the Netherlands: many inactive members in the US eventually returned to the Church, but in Europe they never did.⁶⁶ Van Beek concluded that LDS teachings support a discourse stressing a clear-cut commitment: one is either in or out.⁶⁷ Main factors contributing to disaffiliation among Dutch members were the absence of official LDS discourses on marginal members (for example, divorcees, gays, and lesbians), the lingering tendency to employ an obsolete “tribal discourse” on the blood of Israel, and the dominant LDS discourse of a righteous religious minority waging battle against a large majority.

64. Decoo, “Feeding the Fleeting Flock,” 101.

65. Walter E. A. van Beek, “Mormonism, A Global Counter-Church?” *By Common Consent*, June 18, 2009, accessed Nov. 12, 2020, bycommonconsent.com/2009/06/18/mormonism-a-global-counter-church-I, 4.

66. Van Beek, “Mormonism, A Global Counter-Church?,” 7.

67. Van Beek, “Mormonism, A Global Counter-Church?v” 9–10.

These LDS teachings were connected to the history of the Mormon Church in the United States and to mainstream US culture, where they resonated strongly and provided motivation to endure under difficult circumstances. However, these dominant US Mormon discourses were far removed from mainstream cultural beliefs in Western Europe and Latin America, contributing to the lower retention rates.

In addition to these reasons for inactivity and disaffiliation, this article suggests that the leadership style of local LDS Church leaders may also be a contributing factor. The question first raised over thirty years ago by BYU sociologists Howard M. Bahr and Stan L. Albrecht is still relevant: “To what extent does the lay ministry of the Mormons contribute to the perception of local leadership as inept at dealing with intellectual challenges and unusual personal problems?”⁶⁸ For more than three decades, the LDS Church recruited people from similar socioeconomic backgrounds for its main leadership positions at the ward and stake level in Chile, Central America, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Ethnographic research has showed that unpaid leadership positions did not function well in the situations of poverty and little formal education that characterize Latin America and Africa. Moreover, local cultures in both Latin America and Africa conceptualized leadership as a personal quality, undercutting the idea of rotating leadership positions. Local leaders in Central America were overwhelmed, authoritarian, and unable to emulate the US managerial model preferred by the Church. They often lacked the idealized qualities of LDS leaders: love, humility, confidence, and compassion.⁶⁹ They often acted too authoritarian and alienated members, especially the new ones, contributing to the low retention.

Of course, many additional factors other than leadership contributed to the low retention rates in Europe and Latin America: quick

68. 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 (June 1989): 199.

69. Whitehead, *Historical Analysis of Leadership Theory*, 214–215.

baptisms leading to a lack of intellectual and spiritual preparation among new members, the extended amounts of time and money the Church demands from its members, conflicts between new members and older members (and leaders), a lack of confidence between leaders and members, and the high social costs of breaking other cultural expectations.⁷⁰

In all fairness, the LDS Church has worked in the past decades to address the problems of local leadership and the dominance of US culture. As Grover has pointed out:

With the efforts to make the church less conspicuously American there was a parallel effort by the church to delegate more control over the expansion to local leadership. The establishment of the Area Presidency system in 1984 was equally a push to decentralize decision making and to establish controls to prevent deviation from church-wide policies. Those in the Area Presidencies were either Americans or Latin Americans who had been trained within the administrative system of the church. The result is that Mormon worship and practice in Latin America is similar to that found in the United States and significantly different and distinctive from traditional Latin American religious worship.⁷¹

It is too early to tell if these efforts were successful and to what extent. But they certainly increased the importance of local leadership and raised the visibility of non-US leaders.

Conclusion

The top-down, hierarchical, centralized leadership model concentrated all power and control of resources in Salt Lake City and in the highest LDS leadership functions that were controlled almost exclusively by North Americans. Van Beek aptly described this as a colonizer-colonized

70. Gooren, "Analyzing LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "The Dynamics of LDS Growth in Guatemala"; Gooren, "Latter-day Saints under Siege."

71. Grover, "Mormons in Latin America," 524.

model. These North Americans imposed their own cultural standards on socialization, body language, cultural codes, and the limitation of approved expressions of LDS worship in style, music, and ritual all over the world. US leaders also imposed their own views and their ethnocentrism to shape members and leaders in other countries to adhere to US standards. Combined with the perception of the LDS Church as “American” and the declining standing of America in the world since the 1990s, this also contributed significantly to lower activity rates. Cooper and Hernández de Olarte explicitly recommended that “foreign administrators must be sensitive to the feelings and aspirations of the people among whom they are working.”⁷²

What about the prospects for future LDS membership growth? Demographics form the basis of Mormon membership growth worldwide, especially the high number of people under twenty-five in many (developing) countries that constitute the main recruitment reservoir of the Church. It is likewise true that once a country’s level of socioeconomic development gets above the United Nations Human Development Index score of 0.8, the so-called secular transition, Mormon membership growth decreases to the 1 to 2 percent range annually.⁷³ A similar membership growth decrease is visible among Jehovah’s Witnesses and emerging among Pentecostal churches in some countries in the Southern Hemisphere. With LDS growth rates currently so low in most parts of the world, a second important conclusion here is that the LDS Church should focus its time and resources on tackling retention (i.e., on campaigns to win back inactive members).

Yet the continued growth of Seventh-day Adventists in the Global South is also proof that a higher sustained level of future membership

72. Cooper and Hernández de Olarte, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Mexico,” 392.

73. Ryan T. Cragun and Ronald Lawson, “The Secular Transition: The Worldwide Growth of Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Adventists,” *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2010): 370.

growth is still potentially possible for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁷⁴ However, this may only happen if the Church can come to accept a more decentralized leadership structure that ends the prime role of Utah headquarters culture as colonizer over the colonized in other continents. When Mormons in Europe and Latin America are allowed more freedoms and their own culturally appropriate forms of worship, LDS growth may well pick up again.

74. Gooren, "Comparing Mormon and Adventist Growth Patterns."

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