

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section III. Chapter 30: Men, Women, and the Gospel

Too Many Women?

Many congregations of the international Church struggle with the lack of adequate local priesthood leadership and small numbers of active Melchizedek priesthood holders. A predominance of female attendees is frequently noted. "There are too many women in the [local] Church," stated one mission president. The problem of "too many women" is a frequent theme of discussion by missionaries and mission leaders and has been the target of numerous local initiatives over the years in the form of restrictions on the teaching of women in order to remedy the lack of local priesthood and "fix" the imbalance. Yet official LDS membership statistics today show that 49 percent of LDS members are male, while 51 percent are female. An examination of the membership rolls of most units where the problem of "too many women" is noted typically reveals the presence of a large number of adult male members, the vast majority of whom are inactive. Even in nations where mission leaders have long decried the paucity of local priesthood leadership, national census data show only marginally more female than male members. The 2002 Chilean census demonstrated relative parity between self-identified female and male LDS members, especially among young adults -- 20,985 versus 20,780 in the fifteen to twenty-nine range and 18,700 versus 14,617 in the thirty to forty-four range. The real pathology is not that too many sisters are living their covenants, but that international male activity and retention rates are low.

Retention of Male and Female Members

While North American data suggest that that the retention rate of female converts is only slightly higher than of male converts, the discrepancy in some international areas is much greater. Lowell C. "Ben" Bennion and Lawrence Young report: "For the U.S. as a whole, only 59% of baptized males ever receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. In the South Pacific, the figure drops to 35%; in Great Britain, 29%. In Mexico (with almost 850,000 members) the figure is 19%; and in Japan, only 17% of the male members ever make it past the Aaronic Priesthood."[330] A review of ordination statistics from the 1983 LDS Church Almanac reveals that the rate was 70 percent in Utah, 52 percent in Canada, 39 percent in Africa, 38 percent in Scandinavia, 34 percent in Europe, 25 percent in South America and the West Indies, 23 percent in Central America, and 21 percent in Asia. While by far not all members who have received the Melchizedek Priesthood remain active, it would be extremely unusual for an adult male who remains active to not be advanced beyond the Aaronic Priesthood. Armand Mauss noted: "In order to form new stakes you have to have a certain number of active priesthood holders. If we cannot hold our new male converts around long enough to get the Melchizedek priesthood, we cannot create new stakes."[331]

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Bennion noted that "one couple who returned from Quezon City in the Philippines in 1993 reported that only 30 percent of their mission's members were active, and 90 percent of the active members were female."[332] Although many males were baptized, few became participating members. Peggy Fletcher Stack reported that in Brazil "the wards and branches sometimes are like dysfunctional families, with overwhelming social needs and too few capable male volunteers to staff the all-male administration. Men make up less than one quarter of the converts and only a small percentage stay active long enough to fill administrative positions."[333] International LDS units where the number of active adult men approaches the number of active adult women are rare.

The gender discrepancy among active members is not new, nor is it restricted only to international areas. Goodman and Heaton wrote in a 1986 article that "for every 100 LDS women in the prime marriage ages (20-29 years) there [were] 89 LDS men."[334] They further noted that the gender disparity among active LDS single adults in North America was even more out of balance: "For all singles over 30 there are 19 active men [who attend church weekly] for every 100 active women." They write that single LDS men and women are "mismatched on vital demographic characteristics. Single women over thirty have higher levels of education, occupation, and Church activity than single men. Marriage to an active male is demographically impossible for many active single females over thirty. And even when there are available males, they may possess other characteristics that rule them out as potential mates. Obviously, marriage is not a universal solution to singleness if the only acceptable marital option is marriage to an active LDS partner."[335]

The Gender Disparity and Religiosity

The higher religiosity of women in almost all religious faiths has been noted from time immemorial. William Alexander, Earl of Sterling, observed in 1637 that women were "to piety more prone." Almost all faiths that report participation by gender report a preponderance of women. A casual observer attending a Catholic mass, a Protestant sermon, or an Orthodox liturgy in almost any country will typically find that women attendees outnumber men, often significantly. George Barna found that women make up 60 percent of participating Christians and that women are more likely than men to read the Bible, pray, share the belief in Christ with friends and acquaintances over the course of a year (27 percent versus 21 percent), serve as a spiritual mentor (19 percent versus 13 percent), set personal spiritual goals (41 percent versus 29 percent), and participate in discipleship programs.[336]

Studies of Latter-day Saints have demonstrated similar findings. James Duke noted: "Barry Johnson and I did a study a few years ago of LDS families. We included 31 different items or measures of religiosity. Of these items, women were more religious on 26 items, one item was essentially even, and men were more religious on only four items ... Women are more likely to feel they are strong members, to attend church weekly, to pray daily, to feel their prayers are answered, and to have spiritual experiences."[337]

The spiritual devotion of women has been observed even in non-Christian cultures. Mahatma Gandhi stated: "To call women the weaker sex is a libel: it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage?"[338] Rates of alcoholism, tobacco use, drug abuse, and violent crimes are lower among women than men worldwide. In virtually every nation, the vast majority of the prison population consists of men, while most regular church attendees are women. One wonders if we should not accept that a somewhat higher rate of religious participation among women is a normal state and not a pathology to be stamped out. Trying to "fix" the situation generally proves to be frustrating and unproductive, like swimming against the tide or trying to defy gravity.

Stunted Growth

In one family member's mission, the mission president mandated that women had to attend church at least three times to even receive a copy of the Book of Mormon or to receive the missionary discussions. One wonders if such an arbitrary criterion represents a valid indicator of spirituality when interested visitors are denied the teaching that provides them the impetus to return. On several occasions, I have seen missionaries following their mission policies turn away interested female investigators who attended church without so much as offering a copy of the Book of Mormon or a missionary discussion. Yet the same missionaries would often make multiple visits to male investigators who had never taken the effort to attend church even once. I know of several other missions with similar policies designed to increase the proportion of male baptisms by restricting the teaching of women rather than through better outreach to men. It is difficult to imagine that this is what Christ had in mind when he sent forth His disciples to teach the gospel to every creature. In almost every case, such policies have predictably led to significant declines in the overall conversion rate and have slowed increase in active membership. Although few missions enforce such restrictive policies, the fact that they exist at all suggests that better education of leaders is necessary.

Some programs have fostered selective sharing of the gospel based on gender. A 1998 Ensign article referred to a new program in Central America advocated by the area presidency: "The goal is to have what we refer to as the 'shepherding ratio' be 10 members per active priesthood holder. Missionaries are concentrating on baptizing potential Melchizedek Priesthood holders, with the goal of adult men representing at least 25 percent of total baptisms."[339] While the "shepherding ratio" concept of 10 members per active Melchizedek priesthood holder might sound reasonable to someone with no familiarity with the international Church, the reality that member activity rates in Latin America typically run at 20 to 25 percent or below would mandate that Melchizedek priesthood holders constitute 40 to 50 percent of active membership in order to achieve just one active Melchizedek priesthood holder for every ten total members. Such a rate is incompatible with a family church seeking to involve men, women, and children. The percent of active membership this would represent is not even achieved in Utah and would be unachievable in most Latin American missions due to fractional activity rates.

The goal of building congregations of faithful active members is far more important than achieving contrived demographic ratios in inactivity-ridden areas. Initiatives based on the misdiagnosis of "too many women" predictably generate their own pathologies. If the right leg is injured, is it appropriate to cripple the left leg to make the two similar? What would turning away an interested investigator of one gender possibly have to do with gaining an investigator of the other? There can never be too many women, men, or any kind of people in the Church. The gospel is for all people willing to obey God's commands. God is not a respecter of persons, and one soul is as precious as another.

The solution to the problem of few active international priesthood holders must involve improving male convert retention rather than discouraging prospective female converts. Programs of adequate prebaptismal preparation can triple or quadruple local convert retention rates in low-retaining areas and are far more effective at building a strong local priesthood leadership base than artificial attempts to increase the proportion of men by restricting the teaching of women. It is possible to focus outreach efforts on men and families without discouraging receptive seekers of either gender.

Women and Growth

The immense contribution of women to the growth of the Church has often been underappreciated. While I focused my finding

efforts as a missionary primarily on men and families (and, I believe, appropriately so), I have come to appreciate that many young women baptized in their teens by other missionaries have gone on to serve as the core of the native missionary force in nations such as Russia, Ukraine, and Mongolia. Mongolia, which has the highest rate of convert missionary service in the world, sent out a number of native elders approaching the number of native sister missionaries for the first time only in 2003. On my mission in Russia, several of the strongest branch presidents and local leaders were men who had been former atheists but were been baptized several years after their wives or daughters after seeing the fruits of the gospel in their lives. Most of them expressed no interest at all in the gospel when their wives joined. Had their female family members been turned away from the Church because of policies to teach only men and families, these priesthood leaders would have been lost to the Church. Many young men and women raised in the Church by convert mothers have gone on to serve missions and strengthen local units. I have often wondered how many thousands of such more have been lost to the Church forever because of policies restricting outreach to their wives and mothers. Every woman has male family members and acquaintances, and women often have an influence on men that other men do not. Faithful women who are living and sharing the gospel inevitably bring faithful men into the Church as well, yet the souls of women are of equal value in their own right.

Female LDS members account for the majority of member-missionary referrals. Similar trends exist in other denominations. The average Jehovah's Witness puts in over sixteen hours each month witnessing to others, and 56 to 75 percent of Jehovah's Witnesses are women.[340] George Barna reported in a 1994 study that most U.S. Christian evangelizers are women. David Yonggi Cho, pastor of the world's largest church, the 750,000-member Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, South Korea, stated: "Women are underused in the church. We use them on telephone -- they talk constantly -- they love to talk on the phone. Put Jesus in their mouth to talk! So women are a tremendous strength in church because of culture -- but in Western culture -- you are afraid of using women. But once women were given the freedom to work [as member-missionaries] ... there was an explosion of [church growth]."[341] One woman brought 365 families into Yonggi Cho's church within a single year.

Missionary work continues to be seen as primarily a priesthood responsibility, yet the role of women as investigators, member-missionaries, and missionaries is at least as significant as the role of men. A focus on fully involving both men and women to build the Kingdom of God is necessary to achieve optimal church growth.

[330] Bennion, Lowell C. and Lawrence Young, "The Uncertain Dynamics of LDS Expansion, 1950-2020," Dialogue, 29/1 (Spring 1996): 19.
[331] Stack, Peggy Fletcher, "Growing LDS Church Goes Global," Salt Lake Tribune, February 10, 1996.
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[333] Stack, Peggy Fletcher, "Brazil Leaves Impression on LDS Church," Salt Lake Tribune, April 5, 2003.
[334] Goodman, Kristen L. and Tim B. Heaton, "LDS Church Members in the U.S. and Canada: A Demographic Profile," AMCAP Journal, 12/1 (1986): 88-107.
[335] Goodman, Kristen L. and Tim B. Heaton, "LDS Church Members in the U.S. and Canada: A Demographic Profile," AMCAP Journal, 12/1 (1986): 88-107.
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[337] Duke, James T., "Latter-day Saints in a Secular World: What We Have Learned about Latter-day Saints from Social Research," Martin B Hickman 1999 Lecture, Brigham Young University, College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, March 4, 1999, fhss.byu.edu/adm/hickman_lecture.htm.
[338] Mahatma Gandhi, as quoted in Young India, April 10, 1930.
[339] "News of the Church. Conversation: The Church in Central America," Ensign, August 1998, 79.
[340] Stark, Rodney and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow So Rapidly: A Theoretical Application," Journal of Contemporary Religion, May 1997, p. 140.
[341] "Breakfast with David Yonggi Cho and Rick Warren: A Conversation between Two Innovative Pastors," July 23, 2001, www.pastors.com/articles/ChoInterview.asp.