

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section III. Chapter 32: LDS Media

Indigenous Literature and Church Identity

Publishers such as Deseret Book have been major contributors in defining contemporary U.S. Mormon culture. The vast array of resources, from "historical fiction" to capture the interest of teens who have difficulty with archaic scriptural vocabulary, to self-help books on parenting, adds an immersive element to Mormon life. Whether official or unofficial, indigenous church literature plays an important role in developing a sense of community within the Church and in fostering the perception of the LDS faith as an acceptable local religion rather than a foreign one. There are two Seventh-Day Adventist publishing houses printing indigenous literature in the United Kingdom alone, yet no nation outside of the Americas has a single publishing house dedicated to printing locally written LDS literature.

U.S. members often fail to fully appreciate the challenges faced by non-English speaking saints. Former Belgian bishop Wilfried Decoo observed: "I well remember a leadership meeting at which a local leader asked a visiting general authority if it would be possible for the church distribution center in Frankfurt to make available books from the Deseret and Bookcraft companies, even in English for local English-speaking members, with permission perhaps to translate some of the more popular books into other languages. The visiting authority responded categorically that the scriptures should be enough for any of the Saints. Yet in the foyer I observed his wife reading a book by Hugh Nibley and his daughter a novel by Jack Weyland."[365] Although most non-English speaking members are appreciative of the resources they have, most also acknowledge a desire for more.

The desire of U.S. leaders to maintain central control of international units has often hindered the autonomy necessary for local members to develop a strong indigenous Mormon identity. Faithful non-English publications by local members have often been officially discouraged,[366],[367] or at best, not encouraged. Even in the LDS international magazine, the overwhelming majority of articles are written by U.S. authors, perpetuating the perception of an American church looking out at the world rather than a truly integrated world faith. Decoo points out that the result is an informational and cultural religious void in societies that place a high value on information and culture. Japanese Mormon Jiro Numano wrote: "If Japanese members were given the editorial responsibility for the international church magazine in Japan, Seito no Michi, members might read the entire magazine with the enthusiasm now reserved for the few pages devoted to local news."[368] The Church's English-speaking leadership has been concerned that it would not be able to ensure orthodoxy in indigenous non-English literature, and non-English LDS-speaking populations are typically too small or of too modest means to make local resource development attractive for the commercial entities that specialize in English-language LDS products. However, suitable solutions could be found for such concerns if the need for indigenous international literature were recognized.

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Reporting Performance

Although I had read hundreds of articles and dozens of books on the international Church, nothing prepared me for the finding in my travels that only a small minority of international LDS members attend church at all. The LDS Church News and other official publications speak in glowing terms about "explosive," "astronomic," "dynamic," or "miraculous" growth in Latin America, the Philippines, Japan, and other areas, while carefully avoiding mention of the fact that only a fraction of nominal members are active. Official media continue to laud "rapid growth" in superlative terms, giving no intimation of the sharply declining growth rates and crisis-level inactivity. The LDS media are generally silent on quality independent research and census data that fail to validate adequately the desired image of rapid growth and high activity. In every case, there is a vast unacknowledged discrepancy between official church membership figures and the number of individuals identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints. Even reports in the secular media touting "rapid LDS growth" are typically based upon raw membership figures provided by church public relations personnel without any disclosure of activity rates or correlation of church data with self-identified affiliation figures. An official church press release ahead of the April 2005 LDS General Conference was entitled: "Over 12 Million Worldwide United in a Single Purpose."[369] Managing Public Affairs Director Bruce Olsen noted: "The numbers don't tell the real story." While it is true that the human and spiritual elements transcend that which can be fully described by statistics, it is equally apparent that statistics are being misused when reports imply that raw membership figures represent believing, active, and participating members. The sacrifice, belief, and devotion of many faithful members are indeed great, but the experience of the fraction of faithful, active members cannot be indiscriminately extrapolated to membership as a whole.

With few exceptions, LDS media convey the message that: "All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well" (2 Nephi 28:21). One need only read further in the verse to learn what the Lord feels about those who teach or believe this. Proponents of selective reporting claim that their mission is to publicize only faith-promoting material. Which style of reporting better builds and conveys faith: the systematic exclusion of data that one does not find favorable or candid acknowledgement of challenges and harmonization of faith and facts? Jim Rohn observed: "Affirmation without discipline is the beginning of delusion." Do we, like the ancient Israelites, have ears that will only hear "smooth things" rather than "right things"? (Isaiah 30:10).

I do not mean to imply that LDS media should be preoccupied with the unworthy or the problematic. Yet we must not misrepresent the international Church by presenting only selective positive data, while avoiding reference to serious but unfavorable findings. Quality journalism would demand at least a brief discussion of challenges and a line or two of objective data on activity rates amid the flow of flowery blandishments to provide context and perspective. Most members have some awareness of challenges but may turn to sources that are not as reliable if they are unable to find quality information in official sources. Members are not looking for sore spots but want to be respected as intelligent human beings who need enough information to determine what is really happening and to draw their own conclusions regarding causes and effects. No intelligent person likes being told what to think.

The way in which we report our growth and the extent to which we are willing to be candid about challenges defines the potential for improvement. Selective reporting fuels complacency and is anathema to any attempts at constructive learning. Jon Madonna wrote: "Nothing stops an organization faster than people who believe that the way that they worked yesterday is the best way to work tomorrow. To succeed, not only do your people have to change the way they act, they've got to change the way they think about the past." The great pianist and composer Frederic Chopin observed of striving for mastery: "Every difficulty slurred over will be a ghost to disturb your repose later on." We must be able to report graciously and respond appropriately to negative trends as well as positive ones.

Christian researcher George Barna observed: "In all of the evaluation research we have conducted during the past two decades, I have seen firsthand that you get what you measure."[370] If we do not measure and transparently report meaningful indicators of member participation, we cannot be surprised when our rolls swell with nominal members who do not participate. Attempts to "promote faith" by selective reporting inevitably backfire. In the 1960s, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church candidly acknowledged its problems with member inactivity in the Philippines and instituted sweeping measures to improve retention. Today, there are over one million active Seventh-Day Adventists in the Philippines, and the Seventh-Day Adventist Church is growing rapidly. Latter-day Saints experienced similar retention issues in the Philippines, but due largely to selective "all is well in Zion" reporting, destructive quick-baptize practices continued largely unchecked for over forty years. Only a fraction of today's half-million nominal Filipino Latter-day Saints ever attend church at all.

The lives and spiritual welfare of the millions affected by quick-baptize policies and other organizational snafus must take precedence over "all is well in Zion" messages. We cannot attempt to build up something that is true by any means other than truth itself. Albert Schweitzer declared: "Truth has no special time of its own. Its hour is now -- always." Zion must be built up upon the laws of the Celestial Kingdom, or it cannot be built up at all (D&C 105:5). Achieving grassroots awareness of the prevalence and the causes of retention and growth problems is a mandatory step toward creating lasting solutions. Acknowledgment of our own inadequacies and failures may stretch us beyond our comfort zones, but it offers the only way to grow beyond past backslidings toward future victory.

[365] Decoo, Wilfried, "Feeding the Fleeing Flock: Reflections on the Struggle to Retain Church Members in Europe," Dialogue, 29/1 (Spring 1996): 118.
[366] Decoo, Wilfried, "Issues in Writing European History and in Building the Church in Europe," Journal of Mormon History, Spring 1997.
[367] Numano, Jiro, "Mormonism in Modern Japan," Dialogue, 29/1 (Spring 1996).
[368] Numano, Jiro, "Mormonism in Modern Japan," Dialogue, 29/1 (Spring 1996), 224-225.
[369] "Over 12 Million Worldwide United in a Single Purpose," LDS.org press release, April 1, 2005, www.lds.org.
[370] Barna, George, Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions, Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003, 126.