

EFFECTIVE RESILIENCE AND DISCIPLESHIP OF NON-MORMON CHRISTIAN  
FAMILIES LIVING IN UTAH

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Effective Resilience and Discipleship of Non-Mormon Christian Families living in a  
Predominantly Mormon Environment.

In this paper, I will mainly address the cultural aspect of what it is like for non-Mormon Christians to grow up and live in a geographic region -- Utah County -- estimated to have 82-88% of the population adhering to the Mormon faith (Arave, 2003). After giving a brief overview of Mormon practices, we will look at ways in which these practices influence interactions between Mormon and non-Mormon children. Finally, the paper will close with advice from various pastors who have raised their children in the Utah County region, as well as Biblical references and methods for assimilating into the Mormon culture of Utah without compromising your faith.

Considering that the overall American population is less than 1% Mormon, it is extremely peculiar to find that over 70% of people migrating to Utah are Mormon. This is indicative of selective migration of Mormons into Utah. (Toney, M. B., Stinner, C. M., Kan, S.). Within Utah, however, there is also selective internal migration taking place. Utah County has the third highest Mormon population density in Utah for the years 2009 through 2013. The Mormon population in this region has been increasing, with 90% of incoming migrants adhering to the Mormon Faith. (Canham, 2014).

Although Mormons selectively migrate into Utah, an interesting research discovery showed that non-Mormons actually express a desire to leave Utah (Tony Et al, 1983). One possible explanation for this could be linked to past research findings which indicated that social life as well as religious life of Mormons is organized through the Mormon church (Kephart, 1982). It is noted that "this process provides a structure for easily integrating Mormons into nearly all aspects of community life within Utah, but is not conducive to integrating non-Mormons into social activities, and may even hinder them." (Tony Et al, 1983)

A local emic term used by Utahans to describe the macro-system, or overarching Utah culture, is the "Provo Bubble," or "Happy Valley." These terms indicate Utahans understand Utah County to have its own distinct culture. The following paragraphs will describe some of the unique mesosystem processes that occur and feed into the larger Mormon culture of Utah County. This excerpt from

MormonScholarsTestify.org comes from a Mormon leader, and sheds light on a part of the socialization process of Mormons: “Mormon children are called to hold positions as class leaders or home teachers. They grow up knowing cooperative ventures are a basic part of life. Where I teach, the Mormon students have formed an association. . . they put on a party, arrange a lecture, hold a conference—they can do it because they have been habituated from their youth up to working together.” (Bushman, 2010)

Another common practice in Mormon children aged 3 to 12 is through the use of songs which children memorize and sing in front of the congregation. Some song titles are as follow: “Follow The Prophet”, “Keep The Commandments”, “I Hope They Call Me on a Mission”, “I Am Glad to Pay My Tithing.” These songs have lyrics such as “Celestial glory shall be mine / If I can but endure”, “Help me to understand His words / Before it grows too late”, “Follow the prophet, don’t go astray. Follow the prophet, He knows the way.” (LDS Music Library, 2016) Richard Packham noted that “Mormon children are taught that they must obey *all* of the commandments. Temptations must be overcome, and a good Mormon *will* be able to overcome them.”

At the age of 3 Mormon children begin to be indoctrinated and are socialized to believe that tithing, obeying the prophets, and being called on a mission are extremely important objectives in the Mormon life. Throughout the child’s life, these end-goals are further stimulated by teaching from the Doctrine and Covenants (one of four holy scriptures in the Mormon church) which offers positive reinforcements for those who remain obedient and faithful to the church, and negative reinforcements for *disobedience*. A few of the reinforcements outlined in the Doctrine and Covenants (D&C) include teachings that: Marriages outside of the temple are not bound in heaven (D&C, 132: 15-17), obedience to the laws laid out by Joseph Smith will result in crowns of eternal lives in the eternal worlds (D & C, 132:55), seal of approval from Joseph Smith or successor is the only eternal seal for marriages (D&C, 132: 46), and if you obey the law you will sit upon thrones and will not be angels but will be a god (D&C, 132: 37)

In addition to these in-church practices, Mormon families meet together every Monday night for family home evening, “The meeting gives parents an opportunity to share sacred beliefs with their children and for children to learn and share their own beliefs.” (Nelson, 2009) Mormon families are

expected to meet twice a day for prayers and devotions; this is put into practice with the hope that the parents will demonstrate the importance of their faith to children and spend time together with their children (Nelson, 2009). Although the amount of rules and the high expectations placed on Mormon parents and children are extensive (as laid out in the Word of Wisdom), this gentle balance of teaching the rules in an intimate family setting makes for an authoritative, rather than authoritarian parenting style, promoting obedience to the church through loving and urgent methods.

It is important to note that in regard to the chronosystem, the previously mentioned habits of Mormon migration into Utah and socialization practices of the Mormon church are continuations of the past. Mauss (1984) notes that the social and economic characteristics of Mormonism in Utah present a unique subculture in which theocracy, communitarianism, and large families were all functional since the original migration to Utah. In alignment with the past practice of communitarianism, it still remains the case that those with Mormon identification desire Mormon community and thus are found to be selectively migrating into Utah; furthermore the Mormon church still seems to be an active communitarian system skilled at integrating Mormon families rather than non-Mormon families into Utah communities.

The use of restrictive hermeneutics is an interesting method that might be pressuring church members to fulfill the quota assigned to them. Specific scriptures and beliefs laid out in the songs and doctrine above, in combination with the communitarian model of the church, may contribute to the Mormon ideology that the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not only Christian, but is the True Christian church. Other such hermeneutics are visibly portrayed in Joseph Smith's writings about complete obedience to the Old Testament law, as well as strict adherence to the many and various laws added to the church by Joseph Smith himself. These teachings are in complete opposition to Matt. 16:13-19, Matt 28:20, John 14:17;26. If Jesus said, "I am with you to the end of the age", and "I have given My spirit to you that He might lead you into all truth", then Joseph Smith's claim that the Christian movement lost its way in the second century CE and needed to be restored by him in 1830 requires us to ask the

question, "Did the Holy Spirit fail to lead us into all truth for this 1600 year time period, the way Jesus had said it would?"

These hermeneutical restrictions are passed on from one generation to the next, prescribed through strict ideologies in adherence to The True church. Such prescriptive beliefs, passed from church leaders to parents and parents to children, cause the Mormons to quickly label others as members or non-members, and as sinful or righteous, according to the strict guidelines found in the Word of Wisdom. All of these practices encourage very narrow, bounded-set category widths, and all of these processes influence the way in which Mormon children interact with other Mormons, as well as with their non-Mormon neighbors and counterparts. Examples are laid out below.

### **Interactions Between Mormon and Non-Mormon Children**

My neighbor, and one of the Christian pastors noted in this paper, stated his intention of moving on behalf of his children. Other kids in the neighborhood ignore his children and refuse to play with them. It is important to recognize that there could be many reasons behind this ostracism: the children of this particular pastor are home-schooled and therefore do not have the daily interaction that these other children have with one another, thus his children are labeled not only as non-Mormon, and recognized for not participating in church events, but they also do not go to school with the rest of the children in the neighborhood.

Mormon children meet together and do activities in the church on a weekly basis. In addition to this, children from the same neighborhood walk to the bus stop together daily; this is another way in which children get acquainted with one another. A child who is exempt from all of these interactions is likely to be labeled differently than children who attend these gatherings. It is important to note that every child will experience distinctly different experiences growing up. While I grew up in the same neighborhood as the children mentioned above, I was largely accepted by the other kids. Yes, I was still labeled as the non-Mormon and ridiculed occasionally, but my intentional participation in the Boy Scouts of America, which was run by the Mormon church, and participation in the public school led my neighbors to realize that I too, was a child, just like them. The public school itself presented its own challenges, but I managed to

find a developmental niche among more tolerant Mormon children (who were often from less active Mormon families), non-Mormon children who were also looking for acceptance, and children of more conservative Mormon families who realized that despite my non-member status, I was still a decent human being.

There were, of course, various occasions where children would discover me to be a ‘non-member’ and immediately cut contact with me. There was also the occasional “Mike, I had a dream, and the world was ending; everyone lived, except you, you died because you aren’t Mormon”, as well as the occasional letter, dropped off on our doorstep, pleading with us to become Mormon. When taking into consideration the social priming that Mormon children go through, it is understandable that they would be concerned for any non-member counterpart that they might meet.

Some of the other pastors I interviewed were from different cities throughout Utah County, and their responses indicated that my experiences were not isolated. One pastor noted that his daughter was invited to the prom, and on the night of prom, she was ditched because the boy had found out that her father was a Presbyterian Minister. Another daughter of this pastor was denied joining the school choir.

### **Effective Responses to Mormon Culture and Scriptures on Families**

The family whose children were socially rejected by the rest of the neighborhood has invested a great deal of effort into creating social acceptance for children within their church community. The family has realized that, although not all non-Mormon children are treated the way that their children have been treated, it is important to give the children in their church a sense of community. They have successfully integrated two events into their weekly church schedule to deal with this issue: Families gather weekly for events such as picnics, movie nights, and other fellowship activities where parents and their children gather and spend quality time roaming, playing, and eating with one another. Another weekly event is focused on fellow home-schooled children. The children meet together and collectively reflect on what they are learning, while bonding with one another.

In regards to responding to this culture, I think that we have one very important lesson to learn from the Mormons. In the New Testament Jesus relativizes biological ties in favor of the new family of believers (Luke 18, Mark 3, 10, 13), in addition to highly valuing children (Mark 10, Matt 18,19, Luke 18). The Mormon church has struck a delicate balance between these two practices. In addition to family home evening, which is meant to strengthen the family in Christ and allow the parents quality time listening to and speaking with their children, Mormon families gather twice a day to pray together and do a family scripture reading. I propose that, while being careful not to assimilate our children into actual Mormon teachings or practices, adopting the Mormon concept of family time and scripture reading could be a beneficial practice. It will emphasize to our children that the Christian faith is equally as important to us as the Mormon faith is to the Mormons. This practice is laid out in Deuteronomy 6:7 “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

One of the Christian pastors, who has been in Utah for nearly 40 years and raised 3 kids in the state, had a concept very similar to the concept outlined in Deuteronomy above. Although he did not actually assimilate the Mormon concept of meeting with his children twice a day for scripture readings, he said that he taught his children to embody the Gospel wherever they go. He exemplified the love of Christ to them, so that they also could reflect it to others. He said there are two golden rules, love others as you love yourself and love the Lord with your whole heart soul, mind and strength. (Matthew 22:37) The significant factor in his family was that he taught his children to live these principles out in their daily lives, teaching them to have empathy on Mormons and non-Mormons alike. Teaching them that the Bible is the fullness of God's revelation and teaching them where the Mormons went astray in their belief that the Bible is apostate and incomplete. (2 Timothy 3:14-17, John 14:17;26)

In a sense, I believe that if you are living in the Mormon culture, it will benefit both you and your family to acculturate to some degree. Nurturing your family and teaching them a foundation that transcends church and proceeds deeply into their daily lives, as outlined above, is an important first step. Once your children have this foundation, they can be a positive witness in their community. Rooting your

children into church activities, such as movie nights, children's meetings, youth groups, and so forth, has been found to affirm children's identity, helping them know that even as non-Mormons living in Utah, they are not alone, and there are other Christian children just like them. With a foundation like this, we should feel safe sending our children out to play with our neighbors, sending them out to be an incarnational witness, exemplifying that they also live, laugh, love and play, just like the Mormon children. Instead of further contributing to the 'member' or 'non-member' mindset displayed in Mormon culture, we should socialize our children in a loving way that does not affirm the segregated 'us' and 'them' mindset of the dominant culture, but rather we should do the best we can to step over these boundaries as suggested in 1 Peter 4:8 which says Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. It is our job to create a community of love and humility for our children within the community that God has placed us in. (John 4:9-21, 1 John 4:7-21, Matthew 5:43-48, Philippians 2:3-4,)

Some practical ways to step over these boundaries could be something as simple as sending your children to Boy Scout groups and other children's activities run by the neighborhood LDS church. For some parents this might be a difficult step because of the amount of ostracism you or your children may have received, or because you want to protect your children from the Mormon religion. In these instances, I want to emphasize the importance of dialogue. Stepping out of our boundaries in an attempt to love our neighbors is a reflection of what Jesus Christ did when He came out of heaven to dwell with us. It is likely that some of the hurts you may have received were not intentional, but a form of cultural misunderstanding. As outlined in this paper, the broader Mormon culture of Utah and the socialization processes that takes place within the LDS church and its' families are distinctly unique. These people simply understand the world differently than you do.

If we want to overcome these differences and find a Biblical love for our neighbors, we will need to take steps towards identifying with them as they are. A valuable method for doing this is through the use of dialogue. "Dialogue is a way of living with our neighbours that places its emphasis on a relationship of true mutuality; it is a way of being fully committed to ones' faith and yet truly open to the other; it puts the emphasis on both listening and learning, on speaking and witnessing; it seeks to engage persons in

ways that allow for mutual correction.” (Ariarajah, 1989) In John 13:34 Jesus says “love one another, even as I have loved you. . . By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

### **Conclusions and Future Study**

Although Mormon families socialize their children to maintain very individualistic goals, the Mormon church still stimulates a very communitarian social environment in Utah County. This social-historical tendency creates an environment that is efficient at integrating Mormon families into the local culture, whereas, non-Mormon families may experience more difficulties integrating into local communities. Although Mormon socialization and restrictive hermeneutics may be influencing member and non-member segregation, the amount of time Mormon families spend together is an admirable trait that Christians can learn from. Non-Mormon Christians have prospered in Mormon environments by overstepping “member” and “non-member” segregation by allowing their children to engage in neighborhood and church social activities. Engaging in loving dialogue with our neighbors might help to engage both Mormon and Non-Mormon people groups in a way that will allow for mutual correction. Further research could include: how to raise a Christian family in Utah (Some of the only information available about raising non-Mormon children in Utah is exMormon.org, a site that promotes atheism), Psychological effects on non-Mormon children living in Utah, successful church programs offered for Christian families in Mormon populations.

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