

Latter Day Saints Movement

Summary: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known for many years as the Mormon Church, is the largest movement descended from the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith. In the mid-19th century, Smith's followers moved from upstate New York, Smith's home, to the West, eventually reaching Utah, where they founded Salt Lake City. Through the present day, members of the movement continue to negotiate their place within Christianity and American society.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the largest denomination in the broader Latter Day Saint (sometimes called Mormon or LDS) movement, a restorationist Christian movement that sprang from the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith (1805-44) and coincided with the Second Great Awakening in the United States. Today, the movement includes the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Community of Christ, and a number of other smaller groups. Like many other restorationist groups, the Latter Day Saints believed that existing Christianity had strayed so far from Jesus' teachings that it required a complete renewal rather than simple reform. While many restorationist movements (like the Stone-Campbell movement or the Puritans) modeled their religion as closely as possible to the religion of the New Testament, Joseph Smith taught that the Bible itself had been corrupted.

Joseph Smith organized his church (originally called the Church of Christ) in 1830 in upstate New York, where he had been experiencing divine manifestations since he was a teenager. From the beginning, the church suffered derision and persecution for both its exclusivity and innovation. Smith claimed that his encounters with God, Jesus Christ and angels meant that he alone could teach correct doctrine, administer baptism, and ordain men to the priesthood. The most important symbol of Smith's restoration was the Book of Mormon, which he claimed to have translated through divine inspiration from golden plates left by an ancient American Christian civilization. For believers, the volume was a revealed companion to the Bible, filling in its gaps and affirming Christ's divinity. Other Americans, however, saw the Book of Mormon as a blasphemous replacement for the Bible and thus evidence that Smith's restoration was un-Christian. They coined the term "Mormon" to designate Smith's followers. Although initially pejorative, the term was eventually embraced by the movement. However, in 2018, the head of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints decreed that members should no longer refer to

themselves as Mormons or shorten the church name to LDS. This was a major shift for a community who had for decades been accustomed to proudly referring to themselves as Mormons.

As a result of the persecution he and his flock faced, Smith led his followers from New York to Ohio (1831), then from Ohio to Missouri (mid-1830s), and finally from Missouri to Illinois (late-1830's). As the church population grew, bolstered by an influx of immigrant converts from Europe, their insularity attracted additional suspicion from their neighbors. In 1838, as many as 10,000 Latter Day Saints were forced out of Missouri by a mob that was assisted by the state's militia, under the direction of the governor. Many fled to a town that Smith named Nauvoo, Illinois.

While in Nauvoo, Smith served as mayor, commander of the city militia, and ecclesiastical leader. There he instituted two of Mormonism's most distinctive theological marks: the doctrine of human divinization and the practice of polygamy. Though he hoped to keep the latter a secret, rumor soon gave way to dissent and eventual exposure, leading to both internal and external conflict. In 1844, Smith was killed by a mob.

Smith's death led to a fracturing of the Latter Day Saints movement. Several sought the mantle of prophetic leadership, with some claiming visions and producing scripture as Smith had. These competing claimants led some small groups to leave Nauvoo while others left the city under the pressure generated from this discord. Over the next fifteen years, various small Latter Day Saints churches appeared across the Midwest and then vanished. When Joseph Smith III, the son of the movement's founder, assumed leadership of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1860, many of the scattered returned. Headquartered in Independence, Missouri, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was renamed the Community of Christ in 2001.

The majority of the Latter Day Saints in Nauvoo followed Brigham Young, forming what is today known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Young was the president of the church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He believed that his community would never find peace within the United States. He led many followers to the valley of the Great Salt Lake in the West where he founded Salt Lake City. This Mormon Trail allowed for a constant stream of European immigrants to travel west, and in 1870 a railroad finally reached the city. Young became governor of Utah in 1851 and governed the

U.S. territory the same way Smith had governed Nauvoo: as a theocracy, in which the church's hierarchy and civil authority blended.

As the 19th century wore on, multiple U.S. presidents and members of Congress tried various strategies to force Mormonism to conform to 19th-century American moral and political norms, particularly after 1852, when the church formally admitted the practice of plural marriage. In 1857 the U.S. Army entered Utah to monitor the church's involvement in territorial governance and removed Young as governor. In the 1880s and 1890s, Utah suffered repeated raids by federal marshals seeking to suppress polygamy. Finally, amidst threats that the government would disincorporate the church and seize its property, the president of the Latter-day Saints announced that the practice of polygamy would cease. Six years later, Utah was admitted to the Union.

The 20th century saw various Latter Day Saints churches seek increased integration into the broader American culture. By mid-century, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had embraced distinctly conservative social and theological positions and had rapidly expanded into the Global South. Of the roughly 15 million members of the church today, about 8 million live outside the United States. The Community of Christ, in contrast, never adopted the doctrinal or social practices Joseph Smith instituted in Nauvoo and has sought common cause with mainline Protestantism, discarding much of the exclusivism and emphasis on the authority of the priesthood that today characterizes the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At present, the Community of Christ branch of Mormonism claims approximately 250,000 members.

In the early 21st century, two high profile political campaigns attracted focus to the Latter Day Saints movement: the 2012 presidential campaign of Mitt Romney, a Republican and member of the Latter-day Saints church, and the church's 2008 involvement in the Proposition 8 campaign to ban gay marriage in California. In recent years, the church has fostered an upbeat and positive public image by emphasizing its diversity, commitment to strong families, and charitable efforts. The 2011 "I'm a Mormon" publicity campaign highlighted members of the church who are of diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds, earnestly testifying to the benefits membership in the faith has fostered. Though the rate of growth of the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has slowed, it continues to expand across the world today.