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Latter-day Saints as a Subculture

Our Survival and Impact Upon the American Culture

Editorial Note: The contents of these presentations represent the views of the author and are not to be construed in any way as an official view of AMCAP or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Margaret Hoopes: I will focus my brief remarks on what we as LDS professional practitioners and researchers can do to create a greater positive impact on the American Culture. I propose three challenges for us and some possible outcomes if we can meet those challenges. These challenges are for us as an organization. I think they will help us achieve a personal challenge which I issue to each one of us, i.e. to perform professionally in a manner congruent with gospel principles.

I challenge us as an organization to rise above the distrust, the competition, the fear, and the petty bickering I see manifest in the interactions of our various professional disciplines.

The general climate I refer to is expressed in Axel Russell’s comments on the field of therapy in what he calls the conflict of the “Holy Trinity of the mental health profession,” the psychiatrist, the psychologist and social worker. Add to that pecking order the school psychologist and counselor, the marriage and family counselor, the psychiatric nurses, institute and seminary instructors, etc., and we begin to see the complexity of the problem. When we are busy defending our professional training and putting down that of our colleagues, we are unable to either use our own strengths or draw on the strengths of others.

“[Zion] shall be an ensign unto the people.”
D&C 64:42

If we can become truly interdisciplinary teams united by the love of Christ, freed by mutual respect and focused by common targets we can contribute to the Church and to our culture.

Some of you may say, “I do that. I work well with Brother Smith and Sister Jones, who are trained differently than I. We are doing ‘thus and so’ and are making an impact.” If so, I rejoice in your accomplishments and say, “Help us set up the necessities that we may all participate, that this kind of cooperative, forceful energy may be the rule and not the exception.”

I Corinthians 12: 18-22, “But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body which seem to be more feeble, are necessary.”

Even though we have our just measure of education we, at times, appear provincial because we do not thoroughly investigate all sides of the issue before we begin defending what we interpret as the “Mormon point of view.” A certain amount of rigidity in our method of assessing a situation prevents us from being taken seriously by other professionals. I challenge each of us to examine ourselves for signs of “provincialism” and “rigidity” and to develop processes which allow us to be effective scientists and practitioners with full utilization of our values.

The following paragraph from a story printed in Dialogue captures the essence of what I am saying. A school teacher, new to Mormon culture, new to a small rural Mormon community, makes this angry speech to her class. Even though here is an angry speech I think it is representative of what outsiders sometimes think of us.

“Students,” shouted Miss Spurms sternly, “Grow up!” She was angry. “You people are so self-righteous in this community, that you pretend to be shocked by your own language... You scoff at Chaucer because you cannot understand his artistic purpose. If you know Shakespeare at all, you think he is a lesser writer than Harold Bell Wright. You think Eliza Snow is a greater
The majority of us here may have aesthetic sense and a concept of beauty, but I think we are often provincial in the application of what we know as professionals.

Our insensitivity, part of the rigidity I spoke of, is often apparent in our lack of consideration of the values of others. Their "Christianity" or "religiosity" is evaluated against the "true Church measuring stick" without regard to similarity in values and the possibility of greater success with some degree of ecumenical unity. Why can we not coordinate our efforts with others, not of our faith, who have similar goals in regard to some social issues, such as abortion, sex education in the home, sanctity of marriage, etc.?

At times we appear defensive, unwilling, and incapable of examining LDS culture or our own personal way of dealing with social issues which "seem" to be at odds with the gospel. Though we may arrive at the same conclusion after thorough examination, at times our unwillingness to examine gives us the appearance of "no aesthetic sense," "no concept of beauty," or "extreme poverty." Let me cite a couple of examples.

A male LDS panel member was asked if he had recognized any sexism in the way he dealt with women clients. His quick response was that he treated all clients equally, that each was a child of God with potential for growth. Perhaps he does treat them equally, but his lack of examination with no hesitancy, or tentativeness, as to what he actually does conveyed to some of the women in the audience, a different message than he intended. Rather than gaining credibility, it seemed to me that he lost credibility because he appeared to be insensitive to the issue and to the needs of the women in the audience.

On another panel a member was asked, as a professional, to comment on the issue of working mothers as it relates to church membership. He quoted only comments from modern day prophets with an apparent refusal to recognize and discuss the difficulties, inconsistencies, and struggles that families experience over this issue. My point is not whether mothers should work but that as a professional he could have dealt with the question differently and still been consistent with his own belief system.

Our little pockets of LDS culture are part of a growing international church with the pressing challenge of sorting out what is gospel and what is American culture, sometimes expressed by Mormons as Utah culture. How can we lend our professional expertise without first examining our own behavior, personally and collectively, with honesty and humor?

Hopefully, with the kind of unity asked for in the first challenge, we will get the training and support from each other which will enable us to examine openly our culture and our personal behavior.

"How can we lend our professional expertise without first examining our own behavior, personally and collectively, with honesty and humor?"

The last challenge that I wish to issue is that we select one or more current problem(s) affecting our culture and blend our resources in research and practice to develop changes congruent with gospel principles. Let us unite with professionals who have similar goals.

As I read the literature I see concentrated efforts by segments of our professional communities to establish standards of behavior antithetical to gospel principles. Example: The issue of the appropriateness of sexual intimacies between client and therapist or the use of surrogates in sex therapy. LDS professionals need to help make the decisions at top level management and develop programs which support gospel principles which are more effective than those which are not in tune with the gospel. Ethical issues, definitions and standards for family life, child advocacy legislature, and issues in the human rights movement are but a few areas which could benefit from our attention.

In summary, as a unified body, able to examine our culture and our personal behavior, and focused on targeted areas, I believe we can learn much valuable information about our own culture, contribute more effectively and creatively to our own programs, and at the same time demonstrate professional interventions molded by our values and our expertise, which will have positive impact at local and national levels on issues important to all of us.

Lowell Bennion: I appreciated Margaret's approach and I want you to know mine will be very different. I am not a professional counselor, and I have taken this topic to apply to the Church, to the Latter-day Saints as people. Just a comment or two on the title, "Latter-day Saints as a Sub-Culture." I have been very interested in the impact of American culture on the LDS culture. That's a theme for the next convention. I think that's just as interesting as what we are trying to do here, if not more so.

I want to comment on survival. I believe that if we are true to God's purpose in restoring the Gospel in the Church that He will sustain us in our
I believe that the institutions once established with deep roots, survive whether they are true to their original purpose or not. The interest of those who get status, power and economic advantage from the institution will see that the institution survives. So I am not worried about the survival of Mormonism in our culture. I'm worried about the quality of our survival.

The one way I believe Mormons could impact America is with what I would like to call life affirmation. I think traditionally Americans have been idealistic, visionary, forward looking, innovative, creative—all these positive things. The two world wars, the Depression, Viet Nam, the recessions, and Watergate have destroyed this basic pattern of quality of American life to a great extent in recent years. I believe that we as a sub-culture still have a spirit of life affirmation. Ours is a faith for all seasons, for all circumstances. We affirm life in all of its facets and dimensions. If we do as you suggest, Margaret, I think we might inspire many Americans to rekindle their almost lost faith, optimism, and idealism. I'd like to suggest that we might do this in five areas. These are just illustrations, they are not comprehensive, and I'll just have to tip my hat to them because of the shortage of time.

In a day of drug abuse and excessive indulgence in riotous living, I think that the Word of Wisdom shines forth like a diamond in a coal field. If we should not only observe the abstentions in the Word of Wisdom but adopt its spirit and principle as well, we would learn to live with moderation and thanksgiving. If we would apply the Word of Wisdom philosophy to all of our living, get back to simplicity and naturalness, and get away from this anxious, wearing kind of life that is so characteristic of America, I think we might have real impact on many Americans. Adolf Hitler, whose ways I detest, had one good slogan, "Freude durch Gesundheit," that is, "Joy through Health." Somehow I feel we never make a really positive attitude or philosophy out of our Word of Wisdom. It is always fairly negative.

The second area in which I think we can have tremendous impact is in the relations between the sexes, marriage, and family life. We are counterparts with a lot of movements in America. Our patriarchal order is contrary to the times as is our emphasis on large families. These should be tempered with the spirit of the Gospel in terms of the patriarchal order and with wisdom in terms of the size of the family. I had a student in Sunday School one day, a very brilliant girl, who went to a commemoration of Brigham Young's birthday. One of his grandsons honored him because he kept the first commandment. She thought he was referring to "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God." But he was talking about multiplying and replenishing the earth. I used to try to teach my students at the Institute not to obey the commandments in isolation, one at a time, but in the context of the total gospel. In other words, to have children—as many children as you care to have and can have—providing you can help them fulfill the meaning and purpose of life. I think the great value we place on family life ought to be taught, exemplified, and stressed in the right way over and over again, and certainly it will appeal to many people in America.

A third area in which we might have a great opportunity is in the area of service. From the Nauvoo exodus to the Tetons Dam disaster, Mormons have demonstrated their spirit of cooperation and solidarity. People today in America have lost a sense of community, which loss of genius of establishing a sense of community in urban as well as rural life. We live, move and have our being in each other as well as in God. Mormon community life is a shared one which is intimate and personal, that is very meaningful in the impersonal, mobile American culture. I feel there is a great opportunity to extend our sense of community to nonmembers, minorities, and people outside our Church. Let me read you just a quick paragraph:

"The free enterprise system has many values and advantages for the educated, the capable, the competitive among us, but I find 20 to 25% of Americans are disabled, unmotivated, uneducated, lacking in aggressiveness and the competitive spirit. Our motley array of welfare programs is politically determined, bureaucratically administered, inadequate, demeaning, often uneven and unjust."

I would like to see the best brains of the Latter-day Saints, whether acting individually or as a church, demonstrate some ways of meeting the social-economic needs of people in creative ways that might take the place of the welfare system. We must have welfare programs—I'm not demeaning them as a group, but I think we need some wonderfully new and fresh ways of meeting the needs of people who can't make it in the free-enterprise system. I believe that we have the power, brains, and resources to demonstrate that.

Fourth, we believe in the living God; not in the absolute God of Christianity, but in a God who respects the eternal free agency of man; a God who needs our help in a very real sense, and who is not responsible for everything that exists and goes on in the world. I believe our concept of God and his relationship to man is believable for our time. Many people are disillusioned when they think they must accept a belief in an absolute God. I believe our doctrine of Christ could be very appealing, particularly if we had the faith and ability to live his teachings, to
walk with humility, to be socially concerned, to have mercy and compassion, and to express these things in intelligent ways.

Finally, the heart and soul of the Latter-Day Saint sub-culture is a concern for the growth and well-being of persons. It is person-centered -- humanism in a context of faith. I believe we have all the values of humanism plus God and Christ as our ideals. We are cooperating with God to bring to pass the full life of persons, helping them to grow towards the stature of Christ. If this mission can be realized, we will have a powerful and beautiful impact on American culture.

Merritt Egan: Good afternoon. After having Lowell Bennion as my ego ideal for 41 years, it is tough to speak after he does.

I too thought about the title of the panel, “Latter-Day Saints as a Sub-Culture, our Survival and Impact on the American Culture,” and I thought of the scripture in Matthew 16 where Jesus said the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. Thomas O’Day whom some of you may remember from when he was here at the University, wrote a book, in 1957 I believe, on the Mormons, in which he suggested or quoted others as saying, that the Church was going to be in trouble because of our rigidity, lack of ability to change, and the way we chose leaders, etc., and that we were going to decline because of these problems. The scripture in Matthew in Jesus’ words indicates that that isn’t going to be the case. However, we have many problems. In some wards I understand there are 100 to 150 divorces or widows. Some of our cities report that one couple in ten live together outside of marriage. Those numbers don’t apply to San Francisco alone, because I saw two cases in one day last week in Salt Lake City. One out of 8 of the children in the United States have one or no parents, when only a decade ago it was 1 in 10. The divorce rate in Utah has doubled in the last 35 years, and increased 170% in the last 10 years. Even temple marriages are having trouble. The number of singles in the last decade has doubled also. I was talking the other day to a branch president of one of our singles wards who said that in the last two months he has held nine courts. We have couples who are married who make plans to remain childless. There is a lot of selfishness in the world. We have serial monogamy often readily accepted.

There is little evidence, however, that the critics of the Mormons are right. We will not end up with a bang, nor with a whimper, as they have said. There are strains, conflicts, storms, and hardships. These may overcome some of us, but they won’t overcome the Church. Our concern need not be with the Church, but with us in our families and our professions. I am reminded of the simple but somewhat profound little song sung by some of our youth, “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.” I am reminded that our individual responsibility is paramount as illustrated in Luke 6:46: “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?”

Our concern need not be with the Church, but with us in our families and our professions.

As to the matter of our impact on the American culture, this is where I think we should put our emphasis, as far as the title of our discussion is concerned. If we are going to have impact, we have to live the principles of the Gospel and produce great results. We are not now producing great results in many areas where we are much superior to other sub-cultures. If we produce great results the world will show interest in them and our better than 25,000 missionaries will begin to have a major impact on the world. Part of the missionary system’s success depends on our lives. The missionary system seems like it is fairly well organized and going forward, but the sample that we have on display, the members themselves is not always consistent with what others want to buy. As far as this organization is concerned, we have to make sure that counselors and therapists are healthy themselves, and have healthy families. This is necessary if we are going to influence the thousands with whom we counsel. Similarly, if the Church is going to have a big influence in this world the same principle must apply. I am reminded of King Benjamin’s address in Mosiah, were he emphasizes the importance of family solidarity through thoughtfulness and service. I also recall Jerry Lewis’ recent work, “No Single Thread,” where he shows that the positive, strong parental coalition is one of the most important factors in producing healthy families.

If we would have an impact on the world, how do we get its attention? How do we impress people positively? How do we get them to accept and practice our principles?

The answers to these questions are the preliminaries to missionary work, an area in which the Church as a whole does not excel. We have a great missionary system, but in some areas we have difficulty producing superior results. More bishops may need to be added to the missionary team to counsel and train families. The Church seems to be moving toward this as the Saturday night sessions before Stake Conference are being oriented towards family education. We are going to have to impress the people of the world as individuals, with our families and with the philosophy we believe, aspire to, and live. Then are we going to come up with great
Why do we have great problems in the family? What assistance is needed? Who can help and how? What is the Church doing and what should they do? What are we doing and what should we do? What are the elements that strengthen the family? These I think are the questions to which we should address ourselves because the strengths are going to come from the family. I would hope that during the discussion period, and perhaps in the small groups particularly, we can talk about some of the characteristics of optimal families. Thanks you.

Joe Bentley: I am thoroughly stimulated by what I’ve heard. In fact, everything that I have prepared is no longer relevant, but as W.C. Fields’ epitaph reads, “All things considered, I’d rather be in Philadelphia.” All things considered, I’m not sure I like being here in this group of very impressive professionals all of whom perhaps have as good or better ideas than we do. I’m not sure why we were selected to be the stimulators, but let me share with you two or three ideas that I have.

We’ve talked about survival, and I think my colleagues have indicated that survival perhaps is not the issue. That leaves us with impact. You don’t have impact unless you have power. In many ways we are powerless both as individuals and as a people. We’re not very big. In general, the kind of society we live in renders us powerless except in one-to-one relationships with other individuals. That’s where we can exercise power, in what the sociologists call the primary group—those people with whom we have face-to-face contact. The scriptures say “Zion shall be an ensign unto the people.” Well, how shall Zion accomplish this? Those of us that live in the Utah valley are aware that for many Zion is a hiss and a byword. We are negatively valued as a people. We are seen by many as elitists, “holier than thou” separatists, who are unwilling to get involved in significant ways in the community. In this community, the people who are actively working to make it better, in my experience, are not members of the Church. So we lose the opportunity to influence by losing the opportunity to gain power.

The anthropologists talk about cultures that are high and low context. By that they mean a society that is high context is integrated, cohesive. There are rules and regulations to guide the conduct of people: they know the rules; they know the norms; they know what’s expected. Those things are all very positive, because they give direction and tradition. The low context society is just the opposite. People are lost. They have no roots. They have no groups to which they can relate. Much of American culture is existing in a low context setting. People who have the high context culture, as we do, are very fortunate. We can go to almost any ward or branch in the world and feel almost instantly at home. We know each other. We care for each other.

But to pick up on a point, we also exclude many people who are not of our culture. While living in Boston, where I was teaching, my family became very good friends with a Jewish couple. We lived in a part of the community that was heavily Jewish. There were few LDS people in the area. One day we began talking about friendship, and he said, “You’re the second LDS contact we’ve had, and we’re not sure we want to be friends with you.”

I was taken back. “Why? We’re the good people of the world.”

“Because you don’t make a commitment to friendship. You’re commitment is to your Church and to your people,” he replied. “Yes,” I said, “That’s right. That’s an important commitment.”

“That leaves me out, then, in a sense,” he said.

I believe that we can make an impact by creating this sense of community that Lowell talked about, but making sure it does not include only the faithful. I think in the eyes of the Lord there is very little difference between any of us. This is a concept we share, but most of us are dear friends of Latter-day Saints; we associate with Latter-day Saints; our social activities are with Latter-day Saint people; we feel comfortable with each other, and as a result, we are diluting the impact that we can have.

“We are seen by many as elitists, “holier than thou” separatists, who are unwilling to get involved in a significant way in the community.”

Unfortunately, in my opinion, many of the overtures we extend to others are done so we can convert them. I have nothing but positive feelings about missionary work and the conversion process, but I think we’re being hypocritical if we seek out friends so that we can meet our ulterior motives. I believe we can make an impact in one-to-one relationships in primary groups — the work group, the family group, the friend group — by being who we are and remembering as I understand the scriptures, that the Lord has said that we should love everyone, not just Latter-day Saints.
We should love everyone to the same degree, as Christ has loved us, and by doing that, I think our impact would be overwhelming. Then we will not be seen as elitists, or separatists, or somehow "holier than thou," as we are seen today by many people. We need, in other words, to become integrated. Now, the real challenge is how to become integrated and not lose our standards.

I think this can be done. At the same time, I'm more of a fatalists than others. I believe we're in the grip of history. I don't think we can do much about divorce. I don't think we can do much about drugs. I think those things are rampant in the land, and they are going to be with us. We wish they were not, but I think our primary alternative is to make sure that we are strong enough internally, in ourselves and in our families, to withstand those things which we are not going to be able to control.

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Henry: I'm greatly impressed by these challenges that have been thrown out to us. Margaret, I believe you dealt primarily with us as professionals and as an organization. You mentioned our provincialism. As one who has lived in Boston, Tallahassee, and several other places, I have noted the tendency on our part to be provincial. In fact, we used to refer to Provo and the Utah Valley as "Happy Valley." You ought to come to Rexburg. I think perhaps we are even more 100% LDS than we were in Provo back in the years when I was a student there. So this is a problem and, of course, a challenge to us as individuals, as well as a group. I also picked up on the note that we don't really need to worry about survival. I hadn't thought of it that way, but I guess you're right. Your emphasis on quality of survival seems to me very important.

Also I was tremendously impressed, Lowell, with your statement about the five areas in which we can have an impact. I believe I agree with those. You say our concept of God is believable, our concept of what the family ought to be is acceptable to many -- not to all, of course -- but perhaps we make a mistake of assuming that it will not be acceptable and you're making us think that over. What if it isn't acceptable to everybody? If it's acceptable to some we ought to try to capitalize on it. Is that what you're saying, Lowell?

Lowell: Generally no idea is acceptable to everybody. It wouldn't be worth two cents if it were.

Henry: Did you all hear that?

Lowell: Somebody said if you try to please everybody, it would end up as a mushy concession. There is just no point in trying to please everybody; people are too different for that.

Henry: Well, of course, our missionary effort is aimed at individuals, at individual families, and not at everybody. Merritt, your comments on our concern for the individual rather than the whole Church, go along pretty well with what Lowell said . . .

Merritt: Nope. I disagree with him.

Henry: You do? All right.

Merritt: I think he contradicted himself a little bit. I'd like him to tell us why he's concerned about the Church. I thought the Church was the people, basically.

Lowell: I'm concerned that we do an awful lot of work in Primary and Sunday School -- although Sunday School attendance isn't very good out our way -- but where things really happen, where we find real stress, is in families. If we have great parents, we most of the time have great children. If we have great children, we have great families. If we have great families, we have a great Church. It is like a cell. I learned in my pre-medical days that if you want to learn something about the body you start with the cell. I think the cell is the family, and if we produce great families then we will produce great individuals as well as a great Church.

Merritt: But the Church also has an existence. It is an entity -- sweet, generous, or whatever they say. The Church as a body has an impact, and I don't think you should discount the importance of that.

Lowell: Well, I'm not really. I'm saying that we're selling the Church, and we ought to continue selling it, but we ought to improve the quality of the product we're selling.

Henry: I'd like to come to Joe's statement here, the fact that, for many, Zion is a hiss and a byword. We are elitists, you said, Joe, and most workers in the community are not members. Lowell, could you respond to that? You're involved in community action here in Salt Lake. Is it true that most of the real community action people are not active Mormons?

Lowell: That's my experience in these social service agencies. I think one reason is that we are wholly pre-occupied, terribly busy, in our own Church work. Could I, while I've got the mike, mention something about Joe's remarks. I agree with him that our great opportunities are on a one-to-one basis, but I think he went beyond that when he said we ought to get interested in the community. I believe that if you're a member of a group of mixed Mormons and nonmembers who have projects to accomplish, then your influence goes beyond the one. So I don't think we are restricted to individual influence in that sense. You really didn't mean that, but you said it, I thought.
Joe: All I was trying to say is that once the issue becomes Mormon-and-non Mormon, then it is not the Church, per se, as the prime influence, but a group of concerned citizens. Our role, I think, is very important there. How can we, as a Church, influence? Then as a Church we must become a pressure group. We must influence people in our daily relationships.

Henry: I'm wondering if Margaret has any suggestions as to what one problem we, as a group, might attack. You said you thought we should identify a problem and attack it as a unified effort.

Margaret: I have several in mind, but I have shortened my comments a little bit. I think there are some issues out in the professional field that affect all of us as citizens and as family members that have already been mentioned. But one that I can mention is the idea of what kind of sexual therapy is appropriate. The use of client-therapist sexual relationships and surrogate partners is really an aberration as far as we're concerned, but we haven't really come up with a plan that's better. Personally we have, maybe, but as a professional we haven't come up with scientific ways that are within the bounds of our own gospel principles for treating these problems.

A year ago when I went down to Mexico City for the International Women's Conference, I found out how provincial I was as a citizen of the United States and a member of the Church. I saw how they were treating some issues that I was very much interested in, besides the family, abortion, and those kinds of things. I heard women say, "Hey, wait a minute. You're in a far different place than we are. We're not talking about the spiritual quality involved, or anything like that. We merely want the right to have a say about our rights." That's a different issue: that's free agency, freedom, being spoken from a different point of view. So when I talk about choosing targeted areas and then being open to them, I agree with what Lowell has said, that people other than Latter-day Saints who are working out their agencies don't trust us to do right by them. They don't trust us to understand them. They in turn don't understand us because they get a different point of view than what we would like them to have, a very provincial or elitist view. By choosing a target and applying really good research ideas, and the Spirit of God, I think that we can begin to appear like we're open to these things.

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward.

D & C 58:26-28