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A Survey of Family Scripture Study in the Latter-Day Saint Home

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In the Latter-Day Saint society, scripture reading, which includes Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price, is given a strong individual and family emphasis. Scripture reading is considered an important instrument by LDS members for shaping of personal values, and much of this reading transpires within the framework of the home and family.

A review of the current literature on personal reading indicates that research has been conducted in areas that concern the influences of reading on the development of personal values (Sabine, G. & Sabine, P., 1983). A substantial literature on Bibliotherapy also exists that is somewhat related to the subject (Salup, A., & Salup, B.J., 1981). However, at this time there is no known professional writing that pertains to the LDS context and this specific topic of study--family scripture reading in the home.

Do Latter-Day Saint families study the scriptures together? If so, how is it accomplished, and to what extent do the family members find it beneficial? For understanding of the LDS point of view, the following are quoted:

...for I know they (the scriptures) shall be of great worth unto them in the last days; for in that day shall they understand them; wherefore, for their good have I written them. (2 Nephi 25:8)

And if you know that they (the scriptures) are true, behold, I give unto you a commandment, that you rely upon the things which are written; for in them are all things written concerning the foundation of my church, my gospel, and my rock. (Doctrine and Covenants 18:3-4)

And the Latter-Day Saints are chastised if they don't read:

Now behold, my brethren, I would ask if ye have read the scriptures? If ye have, how can ye disbelieve on the son of God? (Alma 33:14)

The implication, then, is that LDS individuals must study the scriptures in order to learn, apply, and internalize the precepts contained there. Each individual is charged with that personal responsibility.

This responsibility is taken a step beyond the individual and into the realms of family with the following scriptural admonition:

"Train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old he will not depart from it." (Isaiah 54:13)

Within the LDS framework, this commandment seems to close the circle of scriptural study endeavors. The individual begins with personal study in an effort to build a knowledge and a conviction of the truthfulness of the scriptural messages. As the adult becomes a parent, he or she feels a strong need to guide and teach the children as they grow in the same cycle. Nephi, a prophet in the Book of Mormon, states the importance of parental teaching of the family so that "our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins" (2 Nephi 25:26).

This brief overview of one element of Latter-Day Saint philosophy underscores the strong feelings of responsibility a parent senses to teach the scriptural principles to family members. As one contemplates venturing into such a reading program, several questions may arise.

1. How does one begin a family scripture study program?
2. How can the sessions be kept interesting?
3. What is the best time for the family members to meet together?
4. Would the individual family members gain personally from such a program?

With these comments in mind, other questions arise.

1. Are some families accomplishing this task?
2. In what ways might family scripture study influence today's families?
3. Are there any ideas for a scripture reading program that could be shared?

The present study will be used to establish a guideline of ideas that may be helpful to family heads and ecclesiastical leaders who wish to encourage and organize family scripture reading programs.

Methodology

Planning

A Provo, Utah ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints was chosen as the survey group. This group consists of 116 families who live in the northwest area of Provo, a high percentage of whom are active in church functions. An average of the past five years' activity level includes:

1. From the ward membership of 523, 72% attended Sunday sacrament meetings.

2. Of the adult men's priesthood quorums, 82% of the 110 members attended weekly quorum meetings.
3. Of the 110 adult priesthood members, 91% completed home teaching assignments (personal visits to homes of members).

Family economic levels in the ward area vary, as do the fathers' choices of employment. Of the 70 members surveyed in the study, 20 are retired wage earners, 18 are professors/staff at Brigham Young University, 19 are professional (engineer, banker, lawyer, physician, artist, pilot, salesman), 14 are in small businesses (owners, managers, employees), 7 are government employees (city, state, federal), 5 are teachers (other than BYU), and 4 are students who work part-time. There are no welfare families within the boundaries of this group.

The bishop over the ward was contacted for approval and input. The questionnaire was formulated and reviewed by two education professors and an educational researcher at Brigham Young University, a religion instructor who works with students from a nearby community college, two lay LDS Church members who are not affiliated with the teaching profession, and the bishop of the chosen survey group. The questionnaire was then revised according to the recommendations of the group. The survey was distributed through the adult priesthood quorums. The bishop stressed that participation was to be voluntary.

The presidents of the adult quorums were contacted and their approval for distribution of the questionnaire received. A time and date were established for the actual survey.

Procedure

Each quorum president introduced the survey (which included an explanatory cover sheet) and allowed ten minutes at the beginning of the Sunday quorum meeting. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and leave it at the conclusion of the meeting.

Because there were a number of men whose church assignments required their absence from quorum meeting, the group was smaller than was desired for the survey. Therefore, several questionnaires were personally delivered to the absentees and then collected at a later time, in addition to those given at the meetings.

Within the adult elders quorum, there are 31 members enrolled. Twenty-five of these received questionnaires and 17 members answered and returned them. Several single elders living at home did not participate.

In the high priests quorum there are 80 enrolled members. Sixty received questionnaires and 53 members answered and returned them. One interested visitor asked permission to take his copy to his ward in Idaho for possible use there.

Limitations

The survey was not a total participation for the ward families. Female single-parent families are not included. Illness

and travel caused some interference. Because it was voluntary, several declined to participate. Thirty-six of the 70 total questionnaires were completed in entirety; however, 34 were only partially answered. This was a weakness of the study. The partially completed forms were included in this discussion, however, because several survey questions were open-ended, and this allowed the participants an opportunity to express their opinions.

Some survey items proved to be a problem. No children at home was misinterpreted to mean number of children. Some participants felt there was idea overlap which caused some confusion and repetition of answers.

The findings must be considered highly tentative because of the inability to control the variables involved. Differences in the ward groups such as socioeconomic status, employment, average ages, backgrounds, and education of the adults, as well as personal attitudes and level of activity, restrict the possibility that this study could be widely generalized to other wards of the LDS Church.

Findings

From the results, the survey would seem to indicate that the majority of the families in the Provo, Utah ward are conducting family scripture study programs with varying degrees of success.

From a total of 70 questionnaires, 40 respondents indicated that they do participate in family scripture study, and 30 indicated that they do not. Whether or not the family included children at home did not have as much influence as had been anticipated.

From the elders quorum, 17 (68%) participated in the survey. Seven (41%) indicated that they were participating in a family scripture study program, ten (59%) said they were not. Of the 17 survey participants, seven indicated their family included children at home; four listed husband and wife only. Six did not indicate family number. Of the seven who are holding such programs, four include children; three are husband and wife only.

From the high priests quorum, 53 (88%) participated in the survey. Thirty-three (62%) indicated that they were participating in a family scripture program. Twenty (38%) said they were not. Of the 53 high priest survey participants, 25 indicated the family included children at home; 17 listed husband and wife only. Eleven did not indicate a family number. Of the 33 who are holding the programs, 17 include children at home, 13 are husband and wife only, and three did not indicate family number.

Totals

70 survey participants

40 (57%) hold family scripture study programs

32 (46%) indicate children at home

21 (31%) indicate husband and wife only

17 (24%) did not indicate family number

The majority (30 out of 42 who answered the question or 71%) of those participating in family scripture study find evenings the best time to assemble. A few (9 out of 42 or 21%) prefer early morning or breakfast time. The frequency of the study times varied from once monthly to daily sessions, with the most (18 out of 44 or

41%) choosing to meet once weekly. Sessions, especially with smaller children, are kept short--15 to 20 minutes. Most (14 of 39 or 36%) read about 30 minutes, with some sessions lasting one or two hours. The longer sessions were either by adults only or families with older children at home.

The LDS scriptures--Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price--are the basic tools of study. Most of the families (83%) provide individual scripture copies for each member who is old enough to read. Parents usually meet together prior to beginning the program and formulate the basic plans such as time and day of study, and the specific subject. The related materials are gathered and the lesson is planned and prepared according to the ages and needs of the family members. A few (4 out of 39 who answered the question) indicated a preference to meet as a family, rather than just the parents, to make the initial plans.

The following is a list of other supplementary materials referred to in the survey responses as being helpful:

For families with younger children:

1. Children's books (Bible stories, Book of Mormon stories, etc.)
2. Flannel board cut-outs
3. Taped scripture stories
4. Scripture games

For families with wide age differences:

1. Old and new Family Home Evening manuals (published by the LDS Church)
2. Scripture tapes (especially a dramatized version)
3. Pictures
4. LDS Church magazines
5. Marking pens and pencils

For couples or families with older children:

1. LDS Church books on related subjects
2. Published study guides
3. Tapes (usually not a dramatized version)
4. Relief Society and priesthood manuals, both old and new (published by the LDS Church)

One of the main challenges seems to be how best to proceed with the reading-study sessions. Most of those participating read aloud from the scriptures with family members each taking a turn. Other materials mentioned are used as supplementary ideas to keep the sessions interesting and to touch the interests of the various ages. Sixty percent begin their sessions with prayer. Most stress the importance of keeping the reading and discussion within the ability levels of the children. One family solves the age difference problem by dividing the group, with Mother teaching the smaller children and Dad the older ones. Most families agree that the program takes definite planning; it won't just happen. It tends to work better when it is consistent and becomes habitual.

Most families have encountered difficulties in either getting started with a reading program or sticking with it. Persistence seems necessary for success. The greatest deterrents seem to be a lack of commitment and a lack of consistency. Time and opportunity to meet are also pressing problems in today's busy world. Several families indicate that they prefer individual reading-study sessions, and they tend to emphasize this within the family in preference to group study.

Some expressed a desire for a reading-study program but felt they needed help in getting started or encouragement to continue. A desire for a printed guide, outline, or idea list was also expressed. Several stated a wish for more emphasis Church-wide, and particularly for an LDS Church published study guide that would include effective methods of working with families in scripture reading programs.

Other comments seem to indicate that many consider scripture reading to be a vital part of the Church's Family Home Evening program. Many feel Family Home Evening is more important than a separate scripture study time since opportunity to meet together is often limited.

Are there benefits that are worth the effort? All the families who are participating in scripture reading-study programs expressed positive attitudes. All felt that, in differing degrees, it was worth the effort. Many feel their family members are closer, and they are able to resist sibling contentions better than before. The general atmosphere of the home seemed improved and

more peaceful. Parents indicate that their sessions afford an opportunity to handle family or individual member's problems--that answers are found and help is offered within the scriptural framework. Most approved of teaching children to love the stories and identify names and people in the scriptures at a very early age. Parents indicated that they feel the sessions improve their children's overall reading ability since they consistently read (sometimes very difficult material) with the encouragement of the family.

Some indicated a positive influence on their teenagers as the young people were able to find answers to life's problems within the scriptures. Generally, feelings were strong that with persistent efforts, most family members grow to enjoy and look forward to the sessions together.

In summary, the majority (57%) of the surveyed families of the Provo, Utah ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is participating in some form of family scripture reading. The participating groups express positive personal and family benefits that are being acquired from the reading that they indicate could come from no other activity. The families feel they have benefited with a unifying effect, a closeness, that helps bridge daily problems. Positive personal values are taught at a young age and are reinforced throughout one's lifetime. Those who are actively reading scriptures within the family unit overwhelmingly indicated that it is well worth the effort involved to begin and continue a reading-study program based on the scriptures.

The information provided here might also be considered by various ecclesiastical leaders. Scriptural interest is often considered an index to individual or group spirituality. Ecclesiastical leaders might wish to survey their own groups and use the insight gained to guide their planning for membership needs. Parents within the group may appreciate a compilation of ideas gleaned from such a survey.

There are questions that remain unanswered, however. What influence might family scripture study have on individual reading ability, especially among children? Would scripture study influence an adult's or child's choice of leisure reading materials? Does scripture study positively influence a person's self-esteem? What about female single-parent families? Could family scripture study make a positive impact on the lives of a mother and children who face the trauma of a single-parent situation? This study might, then, be of value not only currently to groups, ecclesiastical leaders, families or individuals, but also to those who may conduct future studies of the possible effects of family scripture study on specific family relationships, and the shaping of character strengths and values either within an individual or a family.

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