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## LDS CHURCH MEMBERS IN THE U.S. AND CANADA: A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

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In the absence of accurate, representative, and accessible information about a particular group, perception of that group depends on selective experience, impressionistic sources, and often, the group's ideology. Such is the case with the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The public image of the Church depends on exposure by mass media reports which vary in content, accuracy, and favorability toward the Church. General Authorities may imagine the typical Church member to resemble the local leaders with whom they have contact. Converts may see the missionaries as typical Latter-day Saints. Counselors and psychotherapists may have an image which is overly influenced by their clientele. Moreover, the LDS ideology about families often brings to mind the type of middle-class family displayed on magazine covers—with a husband, wife, and at least two happy children. There is some empirical basis for each of these images, but each describes only one subset of members. Random samples, statistical procedures, and quantitative methods can provide a more balanced, even if less personalized and intimate, description of Church membership.

Church leaders have been concerned about the lack of accurate, reliable, and representative information about members that goes beyond the data on membership records. Therefore, in 1980, they approved a demographic study of Church members in the United States and Canada. This paper will summarize some of the major findings of that study, which have been published previously in other professional journals, the *Ensign*, and the *Church News*. The findings are drawn together here in a single source to provide a concise description of Church membership. The data to be presented focus on age and sex structure, family characteristics, and social-economic status. Each section points to some

of the possible implications of these data for Church leaders and members.

### Method

Data collection was initiated in the spring of 1981. In the first stage, questionnaires were mailed to a random sample ( $n = 7446$ ) of LDS adults, aged 18 and over, in the U.S. and Canada. A reminder postcard was sent out two weeks later. These two mailings generated a response rate of 54%. The second stage involved interviewing respondents who had not returned questionnaires. With this personal follow-up an additional 5% return was achieved. A third step was to extract information we already had about nonrespondents. This provided information on another 15% of the sample. Finally, an attempt was made to interview the remaining nonrespondents by telephone, yielding an additional 7%, for a total response rate of 81%. From all of these steps combined, only 4% of the original sample refused to respond, 1% had died or were no longer members of the LDS church, and the final 14% of the sample were unknown to local bishops and unavailable to telephone or mailing approaches.

We suspect some bias in the reported frequency of religious participation since those who refused and those who were not located are probably less involved in the LDS church. Many in this group would probably not identify themselves as LDS, however, implying comparability of our results with surveys which rely on self-reported preference to establish religious membership. The variables analyzed are observable historical events rather than religious attitudes or opinions. Thus we believe that response bias, due to Church auspices of the survey or patterns of religious involvement, is minimal. We have confidence that our sample is fairly representative of general Church membership in the U.S. and Canada.

### Age and Sex

On the average, LDS church members are typically younger than other Americans. The median age in the Church is 24.7 years compared with 30.0 years in the general population of the U.S. and 24.2 years in Utah (*Church News*, September 24, 1983). Over 40% of Church members in the U.S. are under age 20, compared with 32% of the general population. Because there are so many young people, the proportion of members over age 60 is less than in the general population—10.8% for Church members and 15.8% for other Americans (see Table 1). In the Church, a greater share of resources is devoted to the young. Emphasis on youth programs is clearly justified

but such emphasis might cause a greater risk of forgetting about the elderly.

TABLE 1  
AGE DISTRIBUTION FOR LDS AND U.S. POPULATIONS

<u>AGE GROUP</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>LDS</u>
0-4	7.2	12.3
5-9	7.4	11.4
10-14	8.1	9.2
15-19	9.3	7.6
20-24	9.4	8.9
25-29	8.6	9.0
30-34	7.8	8.5
35-39	6.2	6.1
40-44	5.2	4.5
45-49	4.9	4.1
50-54	5.2	4.1
55-59	5.1	3.5
60-64	4.5	3.4
65 +	11.3	7.4
Median Age	30.0	24.7

SOURCES: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada;  
1980 U.S. Census

Not only are Church members young, there is also a high ratio of female members. Table 2 shows that for every 100 LDS women in the prime marriage ages (20-29 years) there are 89 LDS men. The sex ratios become more uneven at older ages. Singles age 30-39 years have 95 men for every 100 women, but for singles age 60+ years, the figure drops to 24 men for every 100 women (*Church News*, November 6, 1983).

There are important regional variations in these sex ratios. The ratios are much more balanced in Utah than in the eastern U.S., where women make up a much greater proportion of the total. For example, the ratio of males to 100 females age 16 and over is 94 in Utah, 89 in other western states, and 85 in the remainder of the country.

Even when the numbers of men and women are similar, there may be a mismatch on salient demographic characteristics. Single women

TABLE 2

## SEX RATIOS FOR LDS MEN AND WOMEN

Total Age 20–29	$\frac{89 \text{ Men}}{100 \text{ Women}}$
Single Age 30–39	$\frac{95 \text{ Men}}{100 \text{ Women}}$
Age 40–49	$\frac{53 \text{ Men}}{100 \text{ Women}}$
Age 50–59	$\frac{35 \text{ Men}}{100 \text{ Women}}$
Age 60 +	$\frac{24 \text{ Men}}{100 \text{ Women}}$
Weekly Attenders (Singles 30 +)	$\frac{19 \text{ Men}}{100 \text{ Women}}$

SOURCE: 1981 Church Membership Survey,  
U.S./Canada

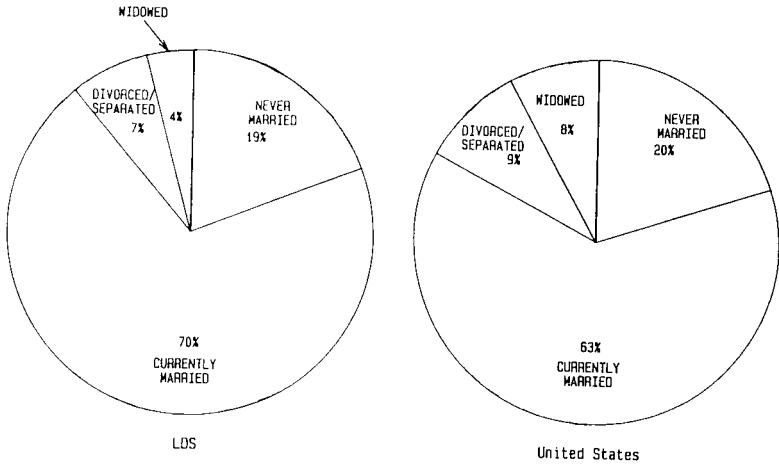
over 30 have higher levels of education, occupation, and Church activity than single men. For example, never-married women over 30 are more likely to have four years of college (42% compared to 18% for never-married men) and professional occupations (70% compared to 38%). For all singles over 30 there are 19 active men (who attend Church weekly) for every 100 active women.

Clearly, marriage to an active male is demographically impossible for many active single females over 30. And even when there are available males, they may possess other personal characteristics that rule them out as potential mates. Marriage is not a universal solution to singleness if the only acceptable marital option is marriage to an active LDS partner.

#### Family Characteristics

Although sex ratios make marriage prospects look pretty bleak for older single LDS women, most Church members *do* marry. Figure 1

FIGURE 1  
Marital Status For LDS And U.S. Adults



SOURCES: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
1980 U.S. Census

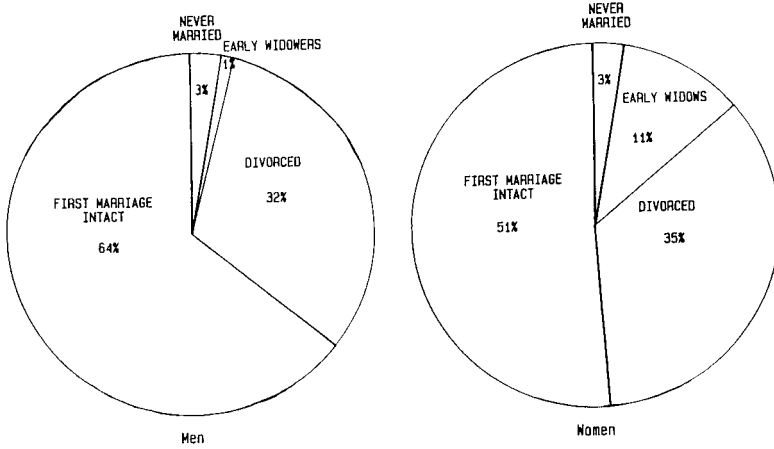
shows the current marital status of adults age 18 years and over. Currently 70% of the LDS sample are married, compared with 63% of Americans in general.

While 19% of adult members have never married, we project that most will have the opportunity for marriage. Figure 2 shows our estimate of men's and women's marital experience before age 60, for men and women now age 18–30 years (*Church News*, November 6, 1983). If we go to today's young people when they are 60 and ask them to describe their marital experience, we would expect a distribution like that shown in Figure 2.

About 3% of both men and women would say they never married, 11% of the women and 1% of the men would say they were married but their spouses died; another third would report they were divorced (35% of the women and 32% of the men) with many eventually remarrying. We estimate that only 51% of the women and 64% of the men would still be in an intact first marriage at age 60.

FIGURE 2

LDS Men's And Women's Marital Experience Before Age 60  
(Estimated For Men And Women Now Age 18-30)



SOURCES: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
Current Population Reports, P-20, No. 312

These findings suggest three important implications. First, while only 70% of adult members are currently married, 97% can expect to marry at some time (but not always to an active LDS spouse). Second, although LDS marriages (and particularly temple marriages) are more stable than other marriages in the country, divorce is becoming a more common experience for Church members. Only 7% of adult Church members are currently divorced or separated, but a third of the members can expect to be divorced at some time before 60 if current trends continue. Two-thirds (67%) of the ever-divorced men and over half (53%) of the ever-divorced women also report a remarriage (Heaton & Goodman, 1985). Third, a growing minority of adults will remarry at some time, and more children will be living with stepparents.

In 1981, 16% of ever-married Church members reported that they had been divorced. The figure for whites in the U.S. (the most comparable group) was 23% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1983). Temple marriages are more stable than nontemple marriages; they are 5 times less likely to end in divorce (*Ensign*, July 1984; *Church News*,

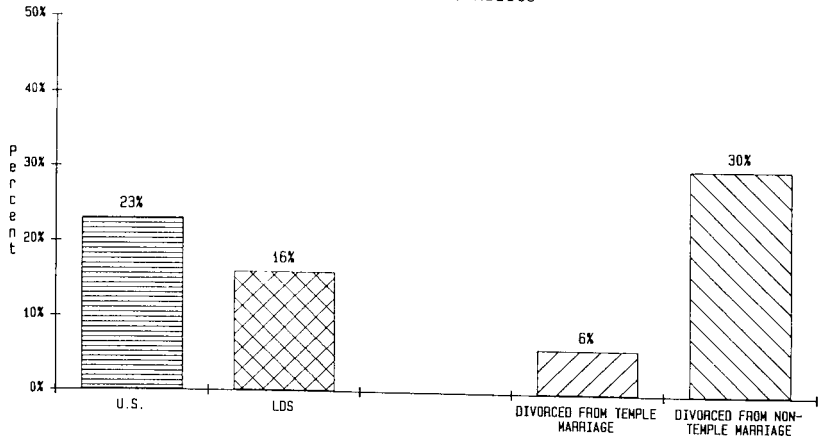
December 9, 1984). Only 6% of temple marriages have dissolved in divorce compared with 30% of nontemple marriages (see Figure 3). Persons who marry nonmembers have the highest rate of divorce.

It is no coincidence that those with temple marriages have more stable marriages. By passing successfully through the screening procedures—interviews with bishops and stake presidents—these people have demonstrated a commitment and a life-style compatible with gospel principles and are initially at lower risk for divorce. Typically, the candidates are older (not teens) and have more education than those who choose another type of ceremony. Although temple marriage is the strongest single predictor of marital stability, age and education also contribute significantly, and independently, to marital stability.

These findings imply that better preparation and appropriate counsel can reduce the risk of divorce. Personal preparation to be worthy of temple marriage combined with an older age at first marriage (over 18 but less than age 30) and a completed education are all related to greater marital stability.

FIGURE 3

Ever-married Persons Who are Ever Divorced:  
LDS And U.S. Adults



SOURCES: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
1980 U.S. Census



When an LDS woman does marry, she can expect to bear more children than her non-LDS counterparts. LDS women in our sample have borne an average of one more child than other U.S. women—3.27 children for Church members and 2.23 for other U.S. women (standardized for marital duration in an intact first marriage) (Heaton & Goodman, 1985). Moreover, temple-married women have more children (average number is 3.46) than those not married in the temple (average is 2.62). Rearing and providing for children is a major concern for younger and middle-age couples.

Another way to view family characteristics is to focus on household composition rather than individual characteristics. Figure 4 summarizes household composition for LDS households in the United States. A third of all LDS households are single adult households, containing an unmarried person living alone or with others; 5% of all LDS households are single parent households with children in the home.

In contrast, 68% of LDS households have a married couple, and most of these couples include two members of the Church married to each other—47% of all households. In well over half of these married-member households (31% of the total), the couple has a temple marriage. This is about equal to the frequency of marriage to a nonmember (21% of all LDS households).

On the final branch of the "tree," 19% of all households contain two members with a temple marriage *and* children in the home. Lower proportions of the other married households have children in the home.

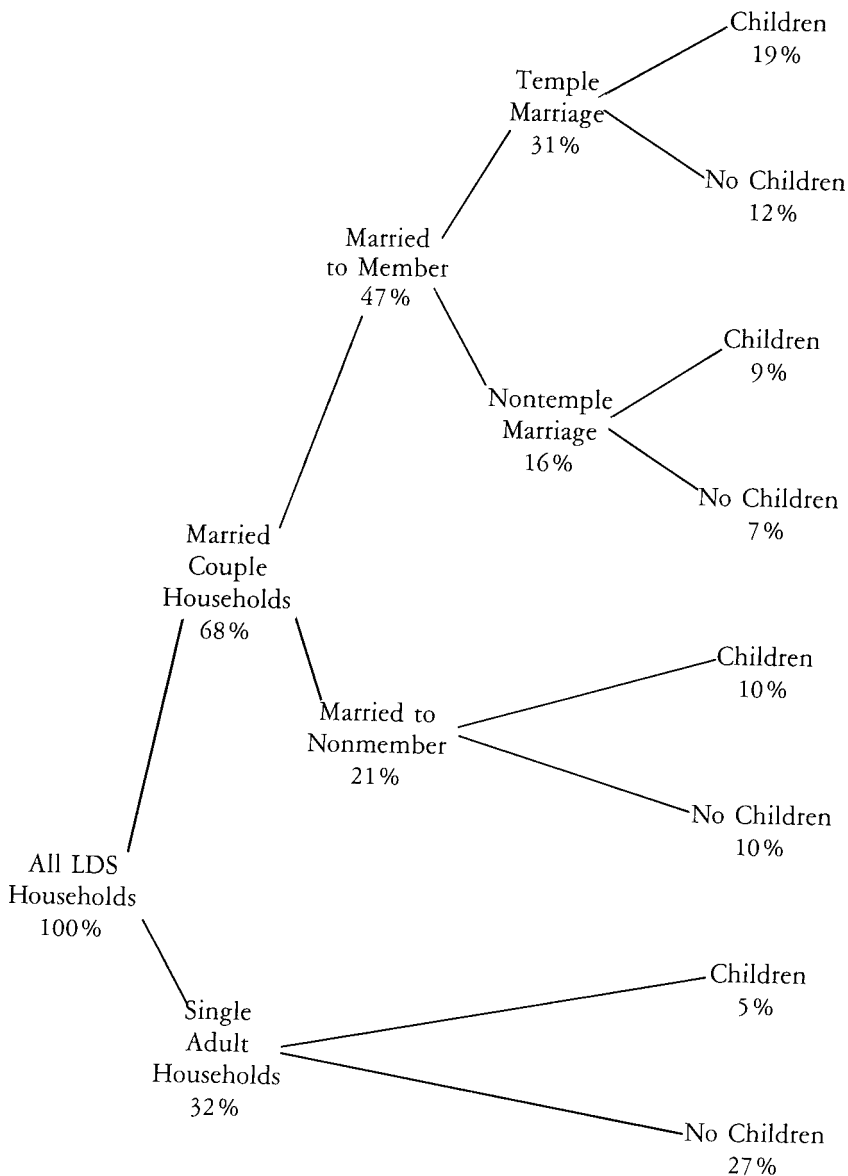
When viewed in this light, less than 1 out of 5 households currently has an "ideal" family situation with temple-married parents *and* children in the home. However, many more people may be in this situation sometime as they progress through the family life cycle. Some temple-married couples, without children now in the home, may have children who have grown and gone; others may not yet have started their families. Additionally, some nontemple marriages will be sealed in the temple at some future date.

In short, there is considerable diversity among members' living situations—a diversity that requires not only understanding and acceptance but that may also require careful evaluation of existing programs, policies, curriculum, and activities, to make sure that the broad spectrum of people, circumstances, and social conditions are adequately considered and addressed by the Church.

In summary, these findings show that LDS teachings about the importance of family life are translated into the behavior of Church members. When compared with national averages or other religious groups in the U.S., LDS church members are more likely to marry and

FIGURE 4

HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION OF LDS HOUSEHOLDS



SOURCE: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada

have more children, and are less likely to divorce but more likely to remarry if there is a divorce. One of the major hurdles faced by members (particularly women) in attaining the ideal of temple marriage is the unavailability of suitable LDS men for potential mates. But when a temple marriage is achieved, the couple generally has more children and the marriage is less likely to end in divorce than a nontemple marriage. Also, while many individuals may have a temple marriage with children in the home for a period of time, it's only a low proportion of them that are in this situation at any one time.

These data demonstrate the fallacy of equating life-cycle and cross-sectional descriptions of family experience. For example, a vast majority of Church members will marry and rear children. This will be a fundamental experience for most members of the Church. Thus, the programs and emphasis of the Church on family life have the potential of providing a great benefit. On the other hand, only about a third of the households, at any single point in time, consist of a married couple and children. Other types of activities and programs may be more relevant for these households. Just as different types of families experience different types of problems, the nature of family problems changes over the life cycle. Overemphasis on a particular stage of the cycle is bound to leave some groups feeling more isolated or unattached.

The diversity of family situations is reflected, to some extent, in the variety of programs established by the Church. These programs differentiate the membership by age, gender, and marital status. Evaluation of program effectiveness lies far beyond the scope of the demographic project. Our data do indicate, however, that programs and activities must be very broad in scope, if they are to incorporate the diversity of the membership.

### Socio-Economic Characteristics

We now turn our attention to socio-economic characteristics of Church members and the relationships between these variables and religiosity and family variables. Education is a key measure of socio-economic status and an indicator of economic preparedness. LDS men have completed an average of 13.4 years of school and LDS women 13.0 years. Comparable U.S. figures are 12.6 for men, 12.4 for women. Table 3 shows that 53.5% of the men and 44.3% of the women have at least some college experience. This is about a third more than among U.S. men and women. In short, Church members are, on the average, more educated than the general population.

High educational attainment raises questions about the relationship between education and religiosity. Information on both sides of

TABLE 3

YEARS OF SCHOOL COMPLETED FOR LDS  
AND U.S. MEN AND WOMEN

<u>Years Completed</u>	<u>Males</u>		<u>Females</u>	
	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>LDS</u>	<u>U.S.</u>	<u>LDS</u>
0-11	30.7%	15.3%	31.8%	16.4%
12	32.8	31.2	40.5	39.3
13-15	15.6	25.0	14.1	28.6
16 or more	20.9	28.5	13.6	15.7
Median years	12.6	13.4	12.4	13.0

SOURCE: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
1980 U.S. Census

the debate, about religion and secularization, are presented by Albrecht and Heaton (1984). To summarize, most research has shown a negative relationship between education and religious commitment, but often a positive relationship between education and church attendance. These discrepancies are explained by the social nature of church attendance. Using LDS church members as a case study, Albrecht and Heaton demonstrate that LDS members with higher education are more likely than those with less education to participate in a variety of religious activities, including attending church weekly, paying tithing, praying daily, studying the gospel, and saying their religious beliefs are very important to them.

Table 4 shows the relationship between education and these indicators of religiosity. Overall, there is a strong positive relationship between educational attainment and the variety of religious behaviors and beliefs for LDS men. The relationship is generally positive for women, but those with a grade school education sometimes score higher, while those with postgraduate education score lower than adjacent educational groups. Nevertheless, women with a postgraduate education are more likely to report religious involvement than women with only a high school education. Thus, higher education generally appears to be a substantial asset rather than a liability.

Employment status is another socio-economic characteristic to consider. As expected, men are more likely than women to be in the labor

TABLE 4

## EDUCATION AND RELIGIOSITY FOR LDS MEN AND WOMEN

<u>Education Level</u>	<u>Activity</u>									
	<u>Percent Weekly Attendance</u>		<u>Percent Full Tithing</u>		<u>Percent Daily Prayer</u>		<u>Percent at Least One Hour Study Weekly</u>		<u>Percent for Whom Religious Beliefs Are Very Important</u>	
	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
Grade school	34%	48%	40%	50%	52%	72%	41%	56%	71%	95%
Some high school	48	52	51	48	44	61	37	45	75	82
High school graduate	43	54	42	49	44	58	37	44	70	85
Some college	65	71	57	59	54	63	46	53	81	88
College graduate	71	82	68	73	60	75	48	52	81	93
Graduate school	80	76	71	73	68	62	61	48	87	83

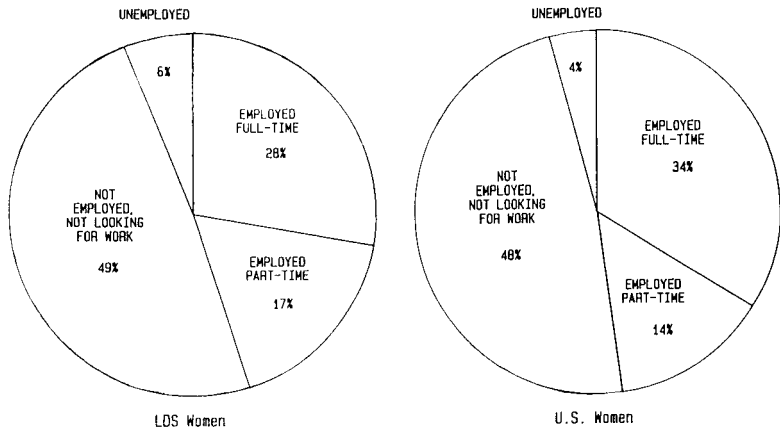
SOURCE: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada

force—85% of LDS men and 51% of LDS women are either working or looking for work. In the U.S., 77% of the men and 52% of the women are in the labor force. These data show that LDS women are as likely as other women to enter the labor force.

Although the total rate of labor force participation is similar for LDS and other U.S. women, there are important differences. First, fewer LDS women are working full time and more are working part time (see Figure 5). Second, marital status and the presence and age of children have a large influence on LDS female employment rates. Figure 6 shows that over 80% of single women are in the labor force, compared with about 50% of married women. Only 36% of mothers with preschool children (0–6 years) are in the labor force compared with 57% of mothers with schoolage children (6–17 years). All single mothers have high levels of participation—over 80% are in the labor force. In summary, LDS women are more likely to work part time, and participation rates are much less for married women with children at home.

FIGURE 5

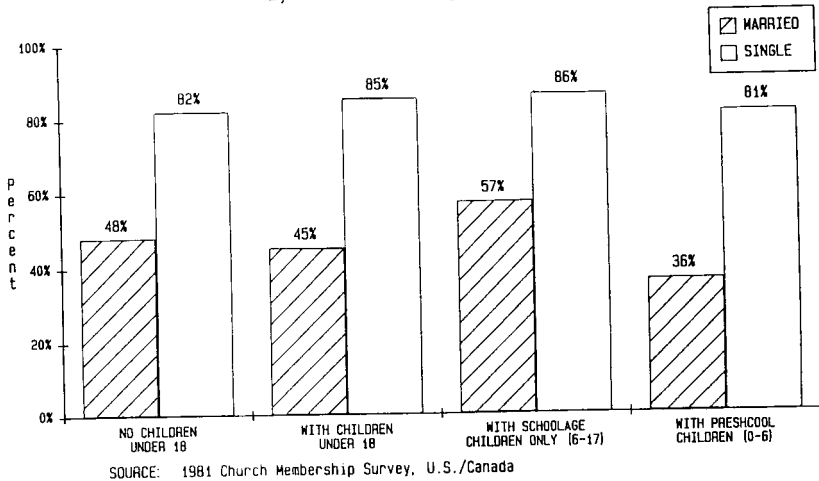
Labor Force Participation Of LDS And U.S. Women



SOURCES: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
 Employment And Earnings, January 1982

FIGURE 6

Labor Force Participation Of Married And Single LDS Women  
By Presence And Age Of Children



Occupational distributions for LDS and U.S. men and women are shown in Table 5. Patterns for Church members are basically similar to those of other Americans, but LDS men are more concentrated in professional, managerial, and craftsman occupations. When compared with men, women typically have lower status occupations—in the professions, clerical fields, and as service workers. Distributions for LDS women are similar to those of other U.S. women.

Total household incomes for married couples and female householders are shown in Table 6. Again, LDS and U.S. distributions are not significantly different. The main differences are between married couples and single females. Almost half (48.7%) of married couples had incomes of \$25,000 or more in 1980. Only 10.7% of female householders had such high incomes, while 45.6% had incomes of \$10,000 or less.

Federally established poverty levels increase with family size: a two-person family would be considered as living in poverty with an income of \$5,338 in 1980, while a four-person family with an income of \$8,414 would be considered at poverty level. Figure 7 shows 7% of the married couples with two children in our sample are at/near the poverty level, while a third (33%) of single mothers, with three children, are in this

TABLE 5

OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION FOR LDS  
AND U.S. MEN AND WOMEN

OCCUPATION	Males		Females	
	U.S.	LDS	U.S.	LDS
Professional	15.5%	20.5%	16.8%	18.8%
Managerial	14.4	15.3	6.9	6.0
Sales	6.0	6.4	6.8	7.4
Clerical	6.4	5.1	35.1	34.7
Craftsmen	21.0	23.9	1.8	3.0
Operators	16.8	10.5	10.7	6.1
Laborers	7.0	6.6	1.2	1.8
Farm	4.0	4.9	1.2	1.1
Service Workers	8.7	6.8	19.5	20.9

SOURCE: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
Employment and Earnings, January 1982

situation. Generally, the proportion of families in poverty increases with family size.

To summarize socio-economic characteristics: LDS men tend to have more education than other American men, are more often in the labor force, and are a little more likely to be in professional or managerial occupations. LDS women also have higher education but are equal with other U.S. women in their labor force participation and occupational distribution. However, LDS married women are less likely to be working when they have high-income husbands and young children in the home. LDS household incomes are similar to their U.S. counterparts, and single parent families are particularly likely to be in poverty. Middle-class tendencies are evident but most socio-economic segments of society are represented in the Church membership.

These data imply that most LDS church members place a high value on education—which may facilitate their church participation. For example, an organization which relies on lay administration finds skills and abilities gained through formal education to be valuable in carry-



TABLE 6  
HOUSEHOLD INCOME FOR LDS AND U.S.  
HOUSEHOLDS, BY HOUSEHOLD TYPE

HOUSEHOLD INCOME	Married Couple Households		Female-headed Households	
	U.S.	LDS	U.S.	LDS
0-4,999	3.9%	4.4%	23.6%	22.0%
5,000-9,999	11.1	6.8	26.8	23.6
10,000-14,999	14.5	12.7	21.2	20.0
15,000-24,999	31.0	29.4	19.7	23.5
25,000-49,000	33.5	37.3	8.1	7.8
50,000 and more	6.0	9.4	0.7	2.9

SOURCE: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
Current Population Reports, P-60, No. 127

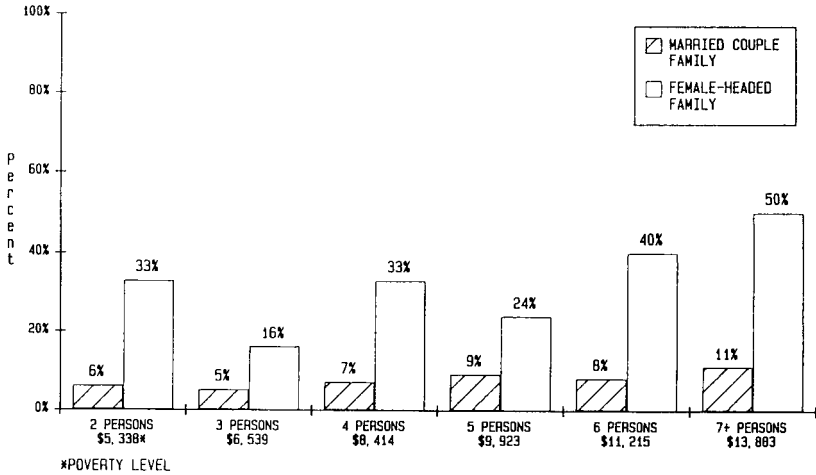
ing out the programs and policies of the Church. But within such a social setting, members with less educational experience are less "active" and may feel left out or passed over for particular callings.

The rough similarity between Church members and others in the U.S. on socio-economic characteristics suggests that Church members experience the same types of economy-related problems as the national population. There is a definite status hierarchy: the skilled are differentiated from the unskilled, the rich from the poor. Concern about making ends meet, promotions, layoffs, and the daily exigencies of getting one's work done are probably just as prevalent in LDS families as anywhere. For example, poverty is a very real threat to single women. The "feminization of poverty" is a concept that applies as well in the LDS context as in the rest of America.

Women's employment is a related issue. Official statements from Church leaders communicate that it is preferable that women are not employed outside the home and about half of LDS women conform to this norm. However, for those who do work outside the home, questions remain concerning how they feel about the messages they receive from leaders and other members and how they balance family, work,

FIGURE 7

Poverty Rate For LDS Families,  
By Type And Size Of Family



SOURCES: 1981 Church Membership Survey, U.S./Canada  
Current Population Reports, P-60, No. 127

and church responsibilities. Many of these women clearly have financial reasons for working. Single women need to support themselves and their families, and many married couples need the wife's income to maintain even a modest standard of living. Others may work to enhance their own psychological well-being. The stresses and strains of the job may be heightened for some of these women by official opposition to employment as well as by greater family demands stemming from having larger families.

Guidance about female employment would be helpful at all levels of the Church hierarchy. This could include teaching young women the importance of being prepared and teaching both young women and young men how to deal with nontraditional roles of men and women that they may encounter in their own lives or marriages. Where women are already employed or desire to be, counsel, training, and support could help women (and men) gain or upgrade education and/or employment skills that are needed to provide adequate income. Women could be encouraged to train in high-paying fields not traditionally female. Long-term solutions should also be considered, particularly for women in female-headed households, who must provide for themselves and

their families. Although many LDS women do remarry after a divorce, there are few active LDS men available; the need for a good provider in the family should not force these women into an unsuitable marriage. Financial and social-emotional support are critical for these women.

### Conclusion

The popular image of the middle-class nuclear LDS family receives some empirical support in these data. Such tendencies, however, can easily be overemphasized. Poverty, divorce, and single parent families are not rare anomalies but are realities which many must deal with on a personal basis. These findings indicate a need for creativity in designing and implementing effective and relevant programs and activities on an institutional level. A spirit of love and acceptance is also needed to incorporate diverse segments of society into our religious community.

Local Church leaders must not only be concerned about the administration and adaptation of Church programs, they must also deal with the application of principles and policies to individuals. For example, while it may be preferable that women are not employed outside the home, thoughtful career guidance may enable women who must work to find better jobs—to “work smart” instead of long hours. At the same time, scheduling meetings and activities at times when employed women are available to participate would also be helpful.

Where sex ratios and local marriage markets make marriage to an active LDS mate very unlikely, local leaders must be prepared to help women weigh the real alternatives and the consequences of staying single or marrying outside the Church. They must also lead the way by showing continued love and support, helping members who choose different options to stay integrated and religiously involved.

At the individual level, the data suggest that while we are striving to obtain a certain socio-economic and family life-style we should be flexible in adapting to the realities of our mortal existence. We should be prepared to face economic and family hardships in our own lives, as well as in the lives of our close friends and associates. Not all families will have a full-time mother at home or be able to provide a variety of music lessons and other opportunities for their children. Increasing numbers will be touched by divorce, either in their own families or through their friends, and will face the difficult tasks of building new personal relationships and dealing with old ones in constructive ways.

The diversity of members' characteristics warns against making too close of a connection between fundamental gospel principles and the specific socio-demographic status of individuals at a particular point

in time. Although the principles of hard work, personal preparedness, and willingness to share with others are valued, neither wealth nor poverty are primary indicators of individual righteousness. Eternal marriage is a basic gospel principle, but marital status is not a safe indicator of worthiness. Indeed, marriage may pose a dilemma when available mates would not make suitable eternal partners. Members are taught that parents should care for children and also be self-reliant, but these two principles may come into conflict for single mothers. Thus, employment status is not a good measure of conformity to gospel principles. In short, we caution against statements which imply a close connection between individual worthiness and socio-demographic status.

Rather, we suggest that the specific challenges of living gospel principles may depend on socio-demographic status. A single mother with small children faces different daily circumstances than does an older married couple or a college student. Ideally, Church programs will provide assistance to people in each type of situation to improve their spiritual lives. Knowledge about members' characteristics thus becomes a tool to assess the adequacy of Church programs and activities in helping all segments of the Church membership. The information in this report may help to provide this broader context within which to view individual members and evaluate current programs.

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