



4-1-1987

The Influence of Traditional British Social Patterns on LDS Church Growth in Southwest Britain

Madison H. Thomas

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Madison H. (1987) "The Influence of Traditional British Social Patterns on LDS Church Growth in Southwest Britain," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 27 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol27/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Influence of Traditional British Social Patterns on LDS Church Growth in Southwest Britain

Madison H. Thomas

Certain legends in Great Britain tell of Jesus of Nazareth, who is said to have spent his young manhood there. Legends aside, the real impact of Christianity in Britain began when Pope Gregory I sent the Roman monk Augustine and forty other missionaries to Kent in 597. Augustine followed good missionary practice in approaching a part-member family and succeeded in converting Ethelbert, Saxon king of Kent, whose Frankish wife Bertha was already a Christian. Christianity gradually spread, and through the succeeding centuries Britain has been predominantly Christian.

But this was a special kind of Christianity, a religion intertwined with political and social power. Almost from the beginning, and especially after the establishment of the Church of England as an official arm of the government, church affiliation in Britain could be a matter of life and death. In the earliest editions of the Book of Common Prayer was printed a proclamation by the king to the effect that anyone teaching religion from other sources might be imprisoned for life and that local political officials were to enforce church attendance and levy fines against the absent. Since 1534, the monarch of England has been the head of the church. Since 1539, the government has had power to legislate changes in doctrine. Even today, the House of Lords includes twenty-six bishops. Evidence of the intertwining of religion with the political and social structure can still be seen in old castles, where one typically finds a great hall, built to serve as the seat of local government, a small chapel for worship, and a torture chamber to enforce both.

The feudal system as it developed in Britain created in the people a high level of in-group loyalty, a distrust of outsiders, and a ready acceptance of one's place within the group, qualities that were later to prove very effective in spreading British power around the globe. Residues of these feudal and colonial traditions are powerful forces in Great Britain to this day and have influenced the British attitudes toward Mormonism.

Madison H. Thomas is a physician specializing in neurology. He served from 1982–85 as president of the England Bristol Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and is currently serving on a public communications mission in New York City.

Since the arrival of missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Britain in 1837, there have been three phases of Church growth. First was the period of rapid, even explosive, growth that peaked in 1868. During this time large numbers of British Saints emigrated to the United States. The second phase was characterized by relatively low rates of convert baptisms, which, along with continuing emigrations, kept Church membership in Britain small most of the time. A third phase began after the end of World War II, when significant numbers of the Saints remained to build Zion in Britain rather than emigrating to the United States. Even with this change, however, and even with an expanded missionary force bringing in more new converts each year, the growth of the Church during this third phase has seemed painfully slow.¹ Visiting Church leaders in recent decades have described the work in Britain as being on a “plateau.” My purpose in this essay is to examine some possible reasons for this situation, drawing on my own experience as well as my perception of certain attitudes and practices of British culture and tradition.

Several years ago, a rapid increase in convert baptisms in southwest England and southern Wales, the area served by the England Bristol Mission, brought to the surface underlying tensions between the full-time missionaries and some local members of the Church. I first became aware of these tensions on my very first morning as mission president, 5 July 1982. I had been in the office for less than half an hour when a stake president called long distance and spent more than forty minutes expressing his dissatisfaction with the work of the missionaries and insisting that almost none of the new converts would remain active in the Church. Twenty minutes after the end of this conversation, a local bishop walked into my office and vigorously delivered the same message for almost an hour. Half an hour later, a high councilor responsible for missionary work phoned to ask if he could make a sixty-mile round trip to tell me essentially what the others had said, that people were not being “properly converted” by the missionaries and so would not remain active in the Church after baptism.

Over the next several weeks, I listened to many more people from all parts of the region. Although these members had a wide range of concerns and impressions about the Church, they consistently expressed uneasiness about recent increases in baptisms. This uneasiness seemed to grow out of a more general, longstanding resistance to the work of the missionaries. I heard stories going back ten or twenty years, stories about “baseball baptisms” and subsequent excommunications, even though the era of such unfortunate incidents had long since passed.

I also saw the tension from the point of view of the missionaries. A very reliable elder told me he was afraid to take investigators to Church meetings in one ward because of the rejecting attitudes of the members.

Later, a stake president reported that over the course of several years dozens of people had been baptized within the boundaries of this same ward. None of them had remained active except one who had been converted by a member friend. Over and over, I heard priesthood leaders describe full-time missionaries as “enemies of the Church,” while missionaries saw the local priesthood leaders and members as obstructions to Church growth. Many bishops and branch presidents systematically resisted baptisms, would in fact refuse to permit baptisms they did not feel good about, even though all the usual requirements had been met. As far as I could determine, the actual missionary work had almost always been excellent. The existing dissatisfactions among local members seemed to have been intensified by the recent increased rate of applications for baptism.

Faced with this problem, I began my study of historical, cultural, social, and organizational relationships in an effort to achieve a better understanding of the feelings of the local Church members and the frustrations of local Church leaders. As a result of this study, I gained great respect for the sincerity and dedication of members of the Church in Britain. Some patterns in their behavior that I had heard criticized, I could now see as honorable and proper in light of long-standing traditions. This made working with those I came to know as valiant local members much easier, and opportunities for change opened up. Careful planning with remarkably sensitive and faithful regional, stake, and local leaders brought about a period of altered relationships among missionaries and local Saints in one section of Britain.

RESIDUAL FEUDALISM

In 1986, Kenneth I. Shine, dean of the UCLA School of Medicine, observed, after working closely with the British people for some time, that “Britain remains a society with a strong class structure.”² The British class system, an outgrowth of feudalism, even today acknowledges special privileges (and obligations) for royal and upper-class families and creates a sense of personal “place” in society. Indeed, official government publications include accepted systems of social class. In some ways, it can be said that modern British socialism has extended the benevolent protectionism of the ancient feudal lords, who needed loyal and reasonably healthy subjects to fight off invaders from neighboring fiefs. Commentators such as Frost and Jay and Sampson have stressed the persistence of strong influences of class and group identity in modern British social traditions and behavior.³ Sampson suggests that modern attempts to reform the educational system have led not to the breaking down of the class system but to even greater social polarization.

At least two vestiges of the British class system are apparent among members of the LDS church in Britain: first, the need for intense loyalty to one's own "in group" combined with a distrust of outsiders; and second, an awareness of and comfort within one's own class and a sense of discomfort when out of it. I have been told repeatedly by convert members of the Church that they felt like strangers and intruders for an extended period—often for years—before their loyalty and acceptability had been thoroughly proven. One missionary sister from another part of England spoke of having literally to "fight" for a place in her local ward.

The British class system receives its strength partly from the self-reinforcing stoicism it has produced through the ages and the attitudes it encourages of tolerance for the way things are. The Church of England and its offshoots, with their concepts of predestination, arose in and could easily accommodate a class system. Mormonism, however, with its doctrines of equality before the Lord, is in many ways the "American religion" it has been called. For the British, there can be difficulties in an organization led by Americans. Both of my predecessors noted that class consciousness among British members contributed to differences in leadership approaches, difficulties in delegating responsibility, and tendencies to deal differently with people according to class status.⁴

The class system, then, encourages dependency relationships and a reliance upon the views of those accepted as leaders. These characteristics, however, can also be accompanied by resentment over the implied superiority of others. For example, British Saints both accept and resent the fact that after nearly a hundred and fifty years the Church in Britain is only partially financially self-sufficient and that four times as many missionaries are sent to Great Britain as are called from there. In the early days of the Church, these problems were not so apparent, as many of the Saints had one eye on the doctrine and the other eye on an opportunity to leave behind the class system and their place in it. But in later years, especially since the charge of President Joseph Fielding Smith to build a "British church,"⁵ the historical patterns underlying British society have become highly relevant to the work of the Church.

The LDS church in Britain has for the most part been a working-class church. Few members are from upper classes, reputedly because such members are not accepted and feel uncomfortable out of their own class. At the other end of the social scale, missionaries have been criticized for bringing in members from the lower classes, especially the unemployed who some feel are a drain and will never be able to support the Church. Some people are said to have joined the Church merely to gain access to Church welfare help, but this does not seem to be a major motive, given the availability in Britain of extensive government assistance.

Yet the strong in-group mentality can alter these patterns within local congregations, as is apparent in a situation reported to me by M. W. Nelson. In late 1982, Elder Nelson and his companion were assigned to a branch where there had been no new members for many years. The branch president asked the missionaries to bring in solid families to strengthen the branch. They did. They brought in four families and a mature sister, all of whom were stable and had steady income from employment. The missionaries visited these new converts a year later and found all of them inactive because none could tolerate the rejecting treatment given them by the older members of the branch, who were mostly unemployed. Several years later, the former missionaries returned to England and made another visit to this area. They found all of these people still inactive, although every one of them still had a strong testimony of the truth of the gospel. Elder Nelson said, "The four families could have been a nucleus for a strong branch if it hadn't been for the old members."

THE COLONIAL PATTERN

Only a few decades ago, the British Empire circled the world. British troops and traders invaded, colonized, and ruled one native population after another "for their own good." British domination, however, was not always appreciated, and freedom from it was often won only after long and bitter struggle and much bloodshed, as in the cases of the American colonies and India. Many British are still sensitive about the loss of the empire, and this sensitivity can be exacerbated when they find themselves subjected to colonialist practices. During the earliest years of the Church in Britain, missionaries worked somewhat like recruiters for a foreign power, winning converts and arranging for emigration to their home base. Later mission presidents functioned much like colonial administrators, managing the affairs of the Church, replacing emigrating native leaders with full-time foreign missionaries as unit after unit was decimated and needed to be built up again.

During the period of heavy emigration, these measures were necessary. However, with the shift in emphasis away from emigration, the mission president sometimes functioned not only as "colonizer" but also as "governor" over local members. Because of insufficient numbers of local Church leaders, this American colonialism was tolerated for a time. However, after Church government was transferred to local stake presidents and bishops, the mission president's role became somewhat problematical. In the eyes of the local Church members, the mission president had all the trappings of a territorial governor—a prestigious title, a body of full-time troops, a

fleet of vehicles, “connections” with headquarters, and a very large house. (We lived in the smallest mission president’s home in Britain, but it was larger than the homes of almost all of the local priesthood leaders.)

If the mission president was the foreign governor, his “troops” were his invasion force. I repeatedly heard comparisons of Mormon missionaries to the American servicemen who were stationed in Britain during World War II, an “invasion” that was deeply resented by many British. The standing British joke about the G.I.’s is still frequently repeated: “There are only three things wrong with the Americans: they are overpaid, oversexed, and over here.” While two of those three objections do not apply to the LDS missionaries, they too have at times been seen as a threat to British life. Like the G.I.’s, the early Mormon missionaries disrupted British families by taking individual loved ones back to the States. That threat has diminished, but others have taken its place. Paradoxically, the more successful the missionaries are in gaining new converts, the more some older members feel that their “territory” is being invaded.

Added to this is a very real problem the work of the missionaries presents to the local Saints. For the mission president and his “troops,” success means gaining baptisms, “winning” converts in Britain. For local Church leaders, success is measured by the continued activity in the Church and progress in the gospel of the members of their congregations. The “successes” of the missionaries, then, can mean increased problems for the local leaders, whose wards or branches might already have many times more inactive than active members.

It is not surprising, then, that a polarization occurred between the aims and attitudes of the “invaders” and those of the local Church members and that a real, though publicly unacknowledged, “resistance movement” developed to thwart the work of the American missionaries. One General Authority in 1971 deplored this phenomenon as “friction.”⁶ Correlation efforts, which recognized two separate “forces” in the same sphere, although applied diligently, did not resolve the problem. In the area served by the England Bristol Mission, the retention rate of new converts was so low that growth of the Church was practically nil. In spite of millions of dollars spent and more than two thousand man-years of missionary effort, which produced thousands of baptisms, the net growth of the Church in this area during a base ten-year period was about one-half of one percent per year, less than would be accounted for by the children turning eight in member families. It appeared that the local priesthood leaders were correct in their impression that people were being lost about as fast as they were gained, almost irrespective of what mission presidents and full-time missionaries did.

A UNIFIED SYSTEM

The sense of relief among leaders and members when these matters were at last brought into open discussion was great. It seemed to me that those involved felt now as Joseph Smith must have felt in the dark days before calling Heber C. Kimball to go to Britain, "that something new must be done for the salvation of His Church."⁷

These British Saints accepted at face value the statement of their prophet "that convert baptisms are not the responsibility of the Missionary Department of the Church, but are the responsibility of the ecclesiastical line officers and members of the Church."⁸ Thus, under the direction of General Authorities, and following handbook instructions, a unified system for missionary work and fellowshipping of converts was developed in southwest Britain. Details were worked out in meetings of Regional Representative Donald V. Norris with five highly supportive stake presidents, the mission president, and the stake mission presidents. The plan was approved in a regional council meeting before going to the executive administrator, Elder Paul H. Dunn, for final amendments and endorsement.

Under the unified system, direction of the day-to-day activities of full-time missionaries was put into the hands of local priesthood leaders. Although I continued as the full-time mission president, I was now referred to as the "missionary president," and I turned many of my former prerogatives over to local mission presidents in the five stakes. Priesthood leaders, especially stake presidents, were quick to use the term "missionary president," as this term seemed to imply that the American president neither presided over "their" territory nor had responsibility for "their" missionary work. The local leaders now formed a regional committee on growth, with the Regional Representative as chairman and myself as executive vice-chairman. Members faithfully traveled hundreds of miles every month to meet and plan for the missionary work throughout the region. Since the boundaries of the region and the mission were the same, all plans were then reviewed for approval in regional council meetings.

Administrative support was provided by the full-time missionary office. I continued to have responsibility for receiving, training, motivating, disciplining, and monitoring the health and welfare of full-time missionaries. A ward mission leader was given responsibility to direct the work of full-time missionaries assigned to his unit.

At local discretion, full-time missionaries now began, in addition to their traditional proselyting work, to join local members in helping new members stay active and inactive members return to participation in the Church. In some wards and branches with little local priesthood strength, it became standard practice for full-time and stake missionaries

to teach the lessons for new members until home teachers became available. This led to continuing contacts with new members as ideal referral sources. In stronger areas, missionaries spent less time on retention and reactivation and more on finding and teaching, all under the general direction of the bishop or branch president.

Missionaries assigned to wards and branches became mission leader assistants, and zone leaders became mission president assistants, assigned to visit local Church units and support the local mission president and his associate in each stake. A committee on growth, chaired by the ward mission leader, included priesthood and Relief Society representatives and stake and full-time missionaries. They generally met each week to consider both proselyting and fellowshipping work.⁹

This unified system brought about some dramatic changes in attitudes. Eliminating a source of internal friction seemed also to help reduce the backbiting in wards and branches that had been noticed by visiting authorities. As members became aware that their own bishops and ward mission leaders actually were in charge of missionary work (as directed by their prophet), their sense of being invaded by the Americans or their agents in the form of new members seemed to diminish. Investigators and new members were welcomed as being part of "us" instead of "them." Since converts were no longer alienated by attitudes of the congregations they joined, a much larger percentage of new members remained active in the Church. The rate of activity one year after baptism rose on the average from 10 to 80 percent, as gauged by stake leaders, who felt a sense of growth and increasing strength (see table 1). So even though fewer converts were baptized now that missionary efforts were not entirely focused on proselyting, the actual increases in committed members of the Church doubled, even tripled over the previous period.

From the countless examples of changing attitudes that were reported to me, I can mention just a few. On one occasion, it became known that a stake patriarch had said he would not attend a planned baptism and was actively opposing attendance by other members. When a sister missionary talked with him, attempting to understand his point of view, she found that he felt the proposed candidates were not worthy of baptism without the eight or nine months of teaching that had preceded his own baptism. When the missionary explained that the baptism had been scheduled by the ward mission leader and that the current missionary program prepared people for further learning after baptism, the attitude of the patriarch changed, and he and his family and many friends joined in welcoming the new members.

In one branch that had been torn by dissension for several years, attendance had dwindled to twenty or twenty-five members, and no new members had come in for more than two years. Under the unified system,

TABLE 1
 Convert Baptisms, Retention, and Net Growth in England Bristol Mission, Bristol England Region, 1982-85

<u>Year</u>	<u>Missionaries</u>	<u>Approximate Baptisms</u>	<u>Estimated Retention</u>	<u>Net Growth</u>
1982	170	1000	10%	100
1983	130	500	25%	125
1984	115	250*	75%	180
1985	(Projected)	300	80%	240
**	**	440	80%	350

*The 250 converts in 1984 were about the same as in most of the years from 1971 to 1981, even with a major reduction in the number of missionaries. The improved net growth came from improved retention of new members.

** Adjusted for number of missionaries at 1982 level

full-time missionaries were assigned in what was termed a “support mode” to work primarily to help the branch president strengthen the branch. The missionaries began visiting all the member families in the company of a branch mission leader. Often these visits were the first visits of any sort by members of the Church that the family had had in several years. In a matter of weeks, attendance at Church had doubled, and friends of members were attending as investigators.

In another branch, members who had problems with the Word of Wisdom repeatedly undermined the work of the full-time missionaries by telling investigators they were not actually required to live as the missionaries were teaching. In this case, when sister missionaries were put entirely under local priesthood direction, several people were brought back to full activity in the Church and began to fill teaching and leadership positions, which caused growth in the branch for the first time in several years.

Of course, many factors have a bearing on a solid increase in the growth of the Church in a particular area. But it would seem that between 1982 and 1985 in southwest Britain, the principal factor in such a change was the introduction of a unified system that placed responsibility for missionary work and fellowshipping and strengthening of new converts on the shoulders of local priesthood leaders and required that the Church-appointed mission president step down from traditional roles to serve primarily as a support to local efforts.

The unified system as originally established remained in operation for just a little longer than one year. After that time, changes in administrative personnel brought about the beginning of elimination of major features of the program. Other factors that contributed to changes after January 1985 include the change from memorized to informal discussions, a change in sequence of discussions, changing leadership, and the extension of mission calls from eighteen to twenty-four months. Therefore, comparisons after that date would have to recognize a number of variables that are difficult to evaluate.

The unified system had other benefits in addition to the increased harmony between full-time missionaries and local Church members. No specific efforts were made to study the effects of decreasing the flow of disappointed or disgruntled inactive or disaffected Mormons into British communities, but it does seem reasonable to assume that for decades past such a factor would have had a negative impact on the image of the Church and the potential for growth, especially in smaller communities. It is likely that the unified system was of benefit to this situation.

It is undeniable that the unified system had an effect on full-time missionaries. Before the unified system, when there were two separate and not always compatible missionary forces, some full-time missionaries gave an impression of being high-powered individuals who were

more concerned with numbers than with the gospel and who, on occasion, rode roughshod over the feelings of local members and leaders in order to make their baptism goals. After working closely with members under the unified system, the missionaries in general seemed more mature, more considerate, and more seriously committed to broader principles. The missionaries even drove more slowly, and vehicle accident rates went down.

It seemed to me that the American missionaries could adapt quite readily to whatever system was prevalent. And for the missionaries from Britain and other European countries, who frequently had reported personal experience with polarization in their home wards and branches before starting their missions, the unified approach seemed most welcome indeed.

In relating these personal experiences, I do not mean to suggest that the problems in our mission and the useful solutions we found could necessarily apply directly to all parts of the world. It is possible, however, that others might find our experience useful. In trying to understand my responsibilities as a mission president, I found that the prevailing tendency to study how nonmembers view the Church was valuable, but it gave only part of the picture. More helpful was study of how various groups within the Church saw one another, and this study involved understanding the social context in which the local Church found itself. To the extent that our experience in the England Bristol Mission can be extended to other areas, it would seem that such study could have a decidedly beneficial influence on the growth of the Church.

NOTES

¹Growth in 1985, for example, was 1.8 percent (see LDS Church Membership Statistical Reports [Salt Lake City: Church Educational System, 1985]).

²Kenneth I. Shine, "A Yank in London—Observations on British Medicine and Science," *Western Journal of Medicine* 145 (September 1986): 406.

³David Frost and Antony Jay, *The English* (Briercliff Manor, N.Y.: Stein and Day, 1968), 25–42; Anthony Sampson, *The Changing Anatomy of Britain* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 58, 127–28.

⁴Personal communication from C. E. Wonnacott, president, England Bristol Mission, 1976–79; personal communication from Lorenzo N. Hoopes, president, England Bristol Mission, 1979–82. President Hoopes subsequently has mentioned his impression that while some members are negative about the missionary effort others are more pro-American and supportive of vigorous missionary activity. Even larger numbers, he notes, have no strong views either way and tend to support the views of those perceived as the leaders. President Hoopes attributes this tendency to cultural attitudes of dependency.

⁵President Joseph Fielding Smith, "To the Saints in Great Britain," *Ensign* 1 (September 1971): 3–4; "Thus the Church is not an American church except in America. . . . [I]n Great Britain it is a British church. . . . We expect our members everywhere to learn correct principles and to govern themselves . . . and stand as spiritual leaders in their nations" (originally delivered at Manchester England Area Conference, 27 August 1971).

⁶Loren C. Dunn, in Conference Report, Manchester England Area Conference 1971, 152.

⁷*History of the Church* 2:487–89.

⁸President Spencer W. Kimball, quoted by President Ezra Taft Benson at mission presidents' conference, Salt Lake City, 3 April 1985.

⁹A brochure with details of plans for the unified system is on file, along with related papers, with mission presidents' reports in Library-Archives, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City. Reports of evolving development and progress were made regularly at mission presidents' seminars.