

Barbara Morgan
Brigham Young University
barbara_morgan@byu.edu

From Martyrdom to Internationalization—overcoming and becoming through religious education

Since its inception violence and education are tightly woven threads sewn in the tapestry of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (whose members are commonly known as Mormons). In fact, it was the young prophet Joseph Smith's search for wisdom which led to his martyrdom, two and a half decades later, in Carthage, Illinois, a city just south of Chicago. Although the Saints lost homes and schools as they were violently driven from New York to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and eventually the Great Basin, their thirst for and emphasis on education could not be destroyed. As one scholar stated, "To the Saints learning was a form of religious devotion, not just a secular pursuit."ⁱ LDS scripture emphasized education declaring that "The glory of God is intelligence," and that "if a person gains more knowledge in this life, he will have advantage in the world to come." (D&C 130:19)

The LDS Church, now with a worldwide population of over fifteen million, has overcome much of the persecution and violence aimed at it and has become innovative in religious education internationally. This paper will provide a brief historical summary of the LDS Church's educational pursuits amidst violence. It will portray how Church leaders used opposition as a catalyst to educate their members and in the process, create a largely successful worldwide religious education system whose mission reaches beyond knowing something, to becoming something.ⁱⁱ

History of Violence and Education

In 1820 in upstate New York, Joseph Smith, a teenage boy, found himself confused by the various religious groups. After studying from the Bible, James 1:5, and recognizing his "lack [of] wisdom", Joseph decided to accept the invitation to "ask God." As a result, Joseph declared that he had seen a vision in which he saw God and Jesus Christ and received instruction. Joseph quickly realized, however, that the sharing of his experience with others, especially religious

leaders “excited a great deal of prejudice against me . . . and was the cause of great persecution.” Years later he wrote how “very strange it was that an obscure boy . . . should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In the spring of 1831, only one year after the LDS Church was organized, escaping persecution and following revelation, Joseph and the saints left New York and gathered in Ohio. During that first year, Joseph established schools for children living in Ohio.^{iv} In addition, the Latter-day Saints offered adult education, becoming among the first to do so in America.^v The School of the Prophets was also established to teach the male church members the doctrines of the kingdom.^{vi} In 1837 the “Kirtland High School” met with an enrollment of 145. Here, Joseph received a revelation regarding a temple designed to be a “house of learning” (D&C 88:118). This same revelation admonished the saints to seek learning and wisdom out of the best books, “even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).^{vii} The Saints were exhorted to instruct each other not only in spiritual matters, but also in history, geography, politics, languages and other areas of important. “Appoint among yourselves a teacher,” they were taught, “and let not all be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege.” (D&C88:121)

For a time, the Saints lived a peaceful life in Ohio, but the United States banking “Panic of 1837,” coupled with the Church’s own financial difficulties, and unorthodox teachings, caused Joseph and his followers to become a target for violence once again. After suffering greatly at the hands of their enemies including an attempted murder and the resulting death of his son, Joseph penned, “I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get,” he continued, “is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priest-craft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, suborned judges and jurors, and the authority of perjured executives, backed by mobs, blasphemers, licentious and corrupt men and women—all hell knocking off a

corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty.^{“viii}

Once again, escaping persecution and in obedience to what they believed was revelation from the Lord, the Saints fled to Missouri, joining others of their faith. One of the first revelations Joseph recorded in Missouri reads, “I, the Lord, am well pleased that there should be a school in Zion. . . (D&C 97:3) As was the case in Ohio, education was a top priority, unlike Ohio, however, persecutions began immediately. In Independence, Missouri, leaders stressed, “It is folly to suppose that children can become learned without education.... It is necessary that children should be taught in the rudiments of common learning out of the best books; and then, as they grow up they can be qualified to search the scriptures, and acquire the knowledge of the Lord^{“ix} . During this time LDS apostle Parley P. Pratt taught a school of Elders. “The place of meeting was in the open, are under some tall trees, in a retired place in the wilderness where we prayed, preached and prophesied, and exercised ourselves in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. . . To attend the school I had to travel on foot, and sometimes with bare feet at that, about six miles.”^x The Missouri years didn’t last long however, as the Mormon’s anti-slavery stance, their practice of plural marriage, and increased political power were perceived threats to locals. In 1838, following years of discord between the Mormons and Missourians, Governor Lilburn Boggs issued an order which in part read, “We must treat the Mormons as enemies and exterminate or drive them from the state.” Three days later, at Hauns’ Mill, between twelve and eighteen LDS members were massacred and buried in a common well.

The next day, Joseph and other Church leaders were arrested leaving the town to be disarmed and plundered by a mob. For six months these leaders suffered in Liberty jail as their families and fellow saints were violently driven to Illinois. While in a helpless and vulnerable state, after suffering privations difficult to imagine, Joseph recorded what he declared to be a revelation from the Lord. One which has become a staple to LDS educational endeavors. “All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good,” he recorded. “The Son of Man hath descended below them all; art thou greater than he?”^{“xi} For Joseph and the Saints, education came not only through books and formal tutoring, but through experience; for the purpose of not only learning, but for becoming. While accompanying his brother in jail Hyrum Smith wrote to his

wife, “Bonds and imprisonments and persecutions are no disgrace to the Saints. It is that that is common in all ages of the world since the days of Adam. . . . The same things produce the same effect in every age of the world. We only want the same patience, the same carefulness, the same guide, the same grace, the same faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . What we do not learn by precept we may learn by experience. All these things are to make us wise and intelligent that we may be happy recipients of the highest glory.”¹

After being released from jail, Joseph met his family and Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois. Between the years 1839-1844, Nauvoo went from being a city of refugees and immigrants, to one of the largest cities in Illinois, rivaling Chicago in number. There the Saints were given a liberal charter, allowing for a system of common schools including a university.^{xii} Joseph hoped that the university would become “one of the great lights of the world, and by and through it, to diffuse that kind of knowledge which will be practical utility, and for the public good, and also for private and individual happiness.”^{xiii} Due to the political environment, unorthodox teachings, economic strength and perceived threat to power, persecutions again mounted and Joseph’s hopes were cut short. Eventually, pressure against the Church and prophet reached a boiling point, and calls for extermination of the Mormons and especially their prophet mounted until Joseph and other leaders were again incarcerated, this time in Carthage, Illinois.

“I am going like a lamb to the slaughter;” he told his family and associates on his way to Carthage, “but I am calm as a summers morn. I have a conscience void of offense towards God and towards all men. I shall die innocent, and it shall yet be said of me—he was murdered in cold blood.” Within a couple of days, between one and two hundred mobbers gathered around the jail, with blackened faces, and stormed the jail. Hyrum Smith, Joseph’s brother, was shot and killed instantly, and Joseph, hit in the collarbone and chest from the doorway and two more from outside the window, fell out the upstairs window crying, “O Lord, my God!”^{xiv} The full affair took place in less than four minutes. From his early twenties to his death at age 38, Joseph Smith had received over two hundred total suits, whether as a defendant, plaintiff, witness or judge, equaling an average of one lawsuit per month during most of his ministry! “Not once was he found legally guilty of any charges against him.”^{xv}

Only two years prior to his martyrdom, in a letter to John Wentworth, editor and proprietor of the Chicago Democrat, Joseph Smith wrote, “Persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent visited every clime, swept every country and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done.”^{xvi}

Learning from History

Although violence killed the prophet, it did not destroy the LDS Church nor their educational endeavors. In an attempt to avoid further persecution, the Saints, under the leadership of Brigham Young headed west to the Great Basin. Even in this depressed state of poverty, Brigham instructed the Saints to bring books of history, politics, science, philosophy, astronomy, maps and diagrams, for the benefit of the rising generation.^{xvii} Herbert E. Bolton explained, “every new settlement as soon as it had planted crops, opened a school—in the open air, in tents, in log houses, in adobes.”^{xviii} The first school in the Salt Lake valley was built only 3 months after their arrival. By 1850, the University of Deseret was created.^{xix} As communities were built throughout the valley, schools were often the first buildings edified.^{xx}

With little separation between Church and state, these schools were under the direction of ecclesiastical authority. This approach however, lasted only for a decade as the isolated society began to mingle with easterners, many of whom came to wean the young Mormons from the influence of the LDS Church.^{xxi} With this new influx of people came tension between the “gentiles” and the Mormons which would culminate in the Utah War of (1857-1858) and the Edmunds Tucker Act two decades later. The Utah War resulted in the transfer of Utah’s governorship from Brigham Young to non-Mormon and federally appointed Alfred Cumming, a full pardon for the Mormons, and the peaceful entrance of the U.S. Army into Utah. The Edmunds-Tucker Act, two decades later (1887) prohibited, “the use of . . .any book of sectarian character,” and Disincorporated the LDS Church from . . .public schools in the Territory.^{xxii} Not willing to once again be bullied out of their land and schools, LDS leaders came up with a plan that would allow them to stay and hopefully dwell in peace among their neighbors.^{xxiii} “We

feel that the time has arrived when the proper education of our children should be taken in hand by us as a people,” the President of the LDS Church declared. “Our children, if left to the training they receive in these schools, will grow up entirely ignorant of those principles of salvation for which the Latter-day Saints have made so many sacrifices.”^{xxiv}

Rather than sending their children to the public schools, LDS leaders counseled members to build their own private schools and teach both secular and religious education. By the late 1800’s over 22 academies were built in highly populated Mormon settlements. By 1920 nearly 6,000 students were enrolled in Church high schools.^{xxv} Eventually, however, due primarily to the expense required of the saints to pay not only for their own private schools, but also to pay taxes for the public schools, Church leaders assessed the situation and came up with a new innovative program. Rather than spending internal funds on secular education, LDS leaders encouraged their members to support government schools while supplementing them with religious education of their own. Thus between 1920-1929, following a few years of preliminary testing of religious education which supplemented secular education in both high schools and colleges, the Church Board of Education announced the closure or transfer to state control of almost all of the academies. Some junior colleges still remained and served as feeders to the larger Church owned Brigham Young University. Now, rather than competing with the government and the public system, the Church cooperated and supplemented it, allowing students to receive both private and public education with little extra cost to the Church and its members.

During the next few decades, as the Church began to expand internationally, especially into Latin America and the Pacific Islands, Church schools again were created for a time when the country itself was not providing sufficient education to the members. As public schools adequately met the needs of LDS students according to professional evaluators, leaders of the Church continued to follow the pattern demonstrated previously, and closed Church schools and supplemented public schools with religious education.

By supplementing public education with religious education, the LDS Church has been able to support and work with, rather than become victims to a people and a system who do not

necessarily hold their own values. They are able to focus their time, talents and resources on strengthening the spirituality of the student by training teachers to be experts in this area according to foundation principles of religious education tailored to the needs of teachers and students throughout the world. Now, over 750,000 students between the ages of 14-30 are being taught in these supplementary religion classes throughout the world.

Conclusion

Violence and education are fundamental components to the history of the LDS Church. Indeed, for most members, it is understood that suffering, although not sought after, is a necessary part of real life education. Orson F. Whitney, a prominent early Church leader penned, “No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God. . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father in heaven.”^{xxvi} Since its inception members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have used the stumbling block of violence and persecution and turned it into a stepping stone to create a worldwide educational system tapestry that not only teaches students to know something, but helps them become something.^{xxvii}

ⁱ Casey Griffiths, “The globalization of Latter-day Saint Education.” P. 33.

ⁱⁱ Dallin H. Oaks, Challenge to Become

ⁱⁱⁱ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Pearl of Great Price, 2013,49.

^{iv} Milton Lynn Bennion, Mormonism and Education (Salt Lake City: The Deseret News Press, 1939), p. 6.

^v Leonard J. Arrington, “The Latter-day Saints and Public Education.” Southwestern Journal of Social Education (Spring-Summer 1977), 10.

^{vi} D&C 88:77-78, 188.

^{vii} Bennion, p. 12

^{viii} (History of the Church, 5:401)

^{ix} Esplin and Randall, that little children might also receive an education

^x Parley P. Pratt, The Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt: Revised and Enhanced Edition. Edited by Scott F. Proctor, and Maurine J. Proctor, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 113-114.

^{xi} (History of the Church , 3:293)

-
- xii Darowski, "School of the Prophets," 11.
- xiii Marnie Hopkins, "History of Latter-day Saint Education in Nauvoo, 1839-1845," Master's Project, David O. McKay School of Education, 2010, accessed June 13, 2011 at <http://contentdm.lib.byu.edu/cgi-bin/showfile.exe?CISOROOT=/IR&CISOPTR=986&filename=989.pdf>
- xiv (History of the Church 6:618)
- xv (From "Legal Trials of the Prophet, Joseph I. Bentley, August 2006)
- xvi (History of the Church 4:450)
- xvii Gardner, David P., Education: Attitudes Toward Education, from Education –The Encyclopedia of Mormonism.
- xviii Berbert E. Bolton, "The Mormons in the opening of the Great West," The Desert news (October 24, 1925).
- xix Church history in the fullness of times, 367-368.
- xx Bennion, Mormonism and Education, 4.
- xxi See Scott C. Esplin, Education in transition: Church and State, Relationships in Utah Education, 1888-1933, Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 2006. P. 59.
- xxii L. Rex Sears, "Punishing the Saints for Their "Peculiar Institution": Congress on the Constitutional Dilemmas," 2001 Utah L. Rev. 581
- xxiii Buchanan, "Education Among the Mormons," 441.
- xxiv James R. Clark, Messages of the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 3 vols., (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 3:86-87.
- xxv Scott C. Esplin, "Stake Academies," unpublished manuscript, in author's possession, 4.
- xxvi (Quoted by Spencer W. Kimball, "Tragedy or Destiny," Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year, Dec. 6, 1955, 6.) (Conference Report April 29, pg. 110)
- xxvii Dallin H. Oaks, Becoming, Ensign