

“Into All the World:” Technological Trends and the LDS Church in the 21st Century¹

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As we rapidly approach the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, it is almost unavoidable that we turn our thoughts to the future and try to visualize some of the possibilities ahead of us. For me, that includes an attempt to visualize the potential growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the next century and the requirements and opportunities associated with that growth.

Since the early 1970's I have been quite impressed and inspired by the vision and perspectives for the future of the Church introduced by a number of prophets, beginning with President Spencer W. Kimball. And in the past 3 years I have adopted these perspectives as a frequent and serious topic of my study of the worldwide establishment and growth of the Church.

Combining my years of professional experience in the computer industry and my academic research in sociology of religion, I have attempted to imagine: (1) what impact some of the technological trends of the late twentieth century might have on the implementation of the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the twenty-first century; and (2) what kind of steps—if any—could be taken now to help us prepare for that idealized but still likely future.

Far from being simply a secular discussion of the theme, my office in the priesthood and my position as a religion teacher make me focus my mental exercise on the ecclesiastical implications of these technological trends. But before doing so I must stress that I am engaging in this intellectual exercise solely out of personal interest on the subject, and not as result of any official task given me by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, the Prophet Joseph Smith once stated: “It is the privilege of every elder to speak of the things of God.” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, p.8). This lecture is for me just another opportunity to exercise that privilege.

Demographic Perspectives

Back in 1984 sociologist Rodney Stark suggested to the academic community that there might be 265 million Latter-day Saints worldwide by the year 2080. A little over a decade later Stark noticed, this time to his own astonishment, that by 1996 his original projection for that year had already been surpassed by almost one million members.

1. This is an updated and expanded version of a academic lecture presented to faculty, staff, and students at Ricks College on October 8, 1998, as part of the “Issues and Events Lecture Series.” An earlier edition is forthcoming in the academic journal “New Perspectives.”

Latter-day Saints now (i.e. 1998) number over 10 million worldwide. If we would tentatively accept Stark's projection as a potential goal, with just about 81 years to reach his projected date, we would be forced to ask: Where and how would we find, teach, baptize, and hopefully retain these additional 255 million Latter-day Saints? In recent years the Church has been experiencing increases of about 300,000 new converts annually. Considering that many among the future members will be the offspring of present and future converts, achieving the 265 million mark would still require over 1 million baptisms annually beginning in 1999!

When we consider the Lord's charge to preach the gospel to every creature the numbers become even more overwhelming. The current world population amounts to 5.9 billion individuals. Recent demographic projections issued by the United Nations' Population Division state that—all pertinent variables remaining equal—in the year 2050 the world population could reach 9.4 billion persons. If we managed to baptize 1 million individuals every year, it would take us 5,900 years to baptize a number equivalent to the current population alone. While it is true that the Lord commanded us to preach the gospel to every creature but to baptize only the believers (see Mark 16:15; D&C 18:28; 68:8; 112:28), these numbers still clearly show that the task ahead is nothing short of monumental.

One of the obstacles to the Church's mission of preaching the gospel to every creature is the fact that the population of the world is spread over vast distances. At the end of the twentieth century, about 45 percent of the world population was located in urban areas. Reports from the United Nations state that in 1996 there were close to 2.7 billion persons living in urban areas. Of those, about 806 million (about one third of the total urban population) lived in 338 cities and metropolitan areas with populations around or above 1 million persons, and about 880 million (roughly another third of the total urban population) lived in 3,015 cities with populations around or above 100,000 persons.

The remaining 976 million lived in small cities with 2,500 or more persons. Arbitrating an average of 25,000 inhabitants per city, we would find this remaining population large enough to fill over 39,000 additional cities of that size². That still leaves aside the rural population—a number close to 3.2 billion persons, which represented about 54 percent of the world population in 1996—most of them located in far-away places without the minimal numbers to staff and sustain stable church units.

2. I am indebted to two of my colleagues, Professors John Nielsen, from the Geography Department at Ricks College, and Tim Heaton, from the Sociology Department at Brigham Young University, for their valuable suggestions in my effort to estimate the number of cities in the world.

Thus, the next logical question must be: how can the Church accomplish the formidable mission of reaching, teaching, baptizing, and later nurturing large populations spread over large distances?

A Prophetic Vision

In 1974, President Spencer W. Kimball stated the following: "I have faith that the Lord will open doors when we have done everything in our power. I believe that the Lord is anxious to put into our hands inventions of which we laymen have hardly had a glimpse." (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p.587). This statement left a strong and permanent impression in my mind since I read it for the first time.

We have come a long way—technologically speaking—since 1974. Today we enjoy technology far beyond our imagination 24 years ago: portable computers powered by ultra-fast processors; time-saving computer-based wordprocessors, spreadsheets, databases, electronic mailing, and seemingly countless other information gathering and publishing software of all kinds; laser-based data storage and transmission; digital telephone networks; cable and satellite television, etc. We not only enjoy these technological marvels, but we also see a phenomenon that appears to be unique to this century: the mass production and subsequent popularization of cutting-edge technologies—even in developing countries.

But having considered these factors we must ask: how can anyone assume that we have reached the pinnacle of technological advancement? I propose that when we consider the current possibilities for the not-so-distant future we may conclude that we are on the threshold of technological breakthroughs that will have as great an impact in our lives—and in furthering the mission of the Church—in the twenty-first century as radio, telephone, television, and the automobile had in the lives of the people of the twentieth century.

Visions of a Conceivable Future

I have conceived a few "visions" or "dreams" for the use of a few of the currently emerging technologies in a not-so-distant future—possibly within the next 50 years. Although a thorough discussion of the economic feasibility or the present technical obstacles are beyond the scope of this lecture, I hope this can still be the starting point of a fruitful discussion of wonderful possibilities.

Home Missionaries

In his preface to the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord stated that there would be no obstacles to his servants in their mission to raise the voice of warning to the nations (Doctrine & Covenants 1:4-5). Since one of the challenges to be overcome is distance, I would envision the advent of part-time missionaries who might teach the gospel out of

their own homes using a communication device that would by itself succeed present-day televisions, computers, and telephones, perhaps using a far more advanced version of the emerging laser-based WDM (wavelength division multiplexing) technology.

With such a device we could have literally millions of part-time, “home missionaries.” These would be regular members of the Church in good standing who would be assigned to “knock on people’s satellite dishes” and present an introductory virtual reality, multimedia-based discussion about the restored gospel. Back in 1970 then Elder Spencer W. Kimball suggested the following:

“We shall use the inventions the Lord has given us to awaken interest and acquaint people of the world with the truths, to ease their prejudices and give them a general knowledge. We shall need to answer specific questions, and perhaps that can be done by two-way radio and TV perfected to a point beyond our present imagination. It is conceivable that such a program greatly perfected could be multiplied ten thousand times in ten thousand tongues and dialects in ten thousand places far and near. ... Tens of thousands of young missionaries endowed with the power from on high will follow up the proselyting.” (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, pp.588-589)

Language would no longer be an obstacle. A new generation of computers perhaps using the emergent quantum computational technology—millions of times faster than the fastest microprocessor available in 1998--combined with real-time, artificial-intelligence-based translation software, could help us easily overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. In fact, these future home communication devices might even sample our voice so people in far-away lands might hear what would seem to be our own voices. A little farther in the future, we could envision the advent of a more refined version of virtual reality technology using three-dimensional images by which we might see and even “feel” as if we were in the presence of our investigators and vice versa.

Virtual Branches

Using this much refined three-dimensional virtual reality communication media, people in far-away locales might one day be able to meet for church services without leaving their homes. They would see, hear, feel, and interact as if they were in an actual meetinghouse. Despite the continuous migratory flow towards urban areas, current projections state that around the year 2030 a significant percentage of the world population will still be living in sparsely populated areas, where the construction of permanent meetinghouses might not be feasible. Advanced communication devices could be the only way by which these future LDS populations might be reached and nourished.

For some this idea may appear to be inadmissible. However, one must remember some of the main objectives of Sunday meetings: (1) to worship the Lord and

(2) to instruct and edify each other through the ministry of the word of God by the power of the Holy Ghost. Under this light, the idea of attending a virtual meeting might not be so absurd. Ordinances like the sacrament could be performed partially live and partially electronically. Each individual or family would have to provide bread and water for themselves. After the sacrament hymn, a priest--perhaps thousands of miles away-- would offer the sacramental prayers in the usual manner and each individual or family would in turn partake of the bread and water.

Sunday school lessons could be provided by the members themselves, who would have callings in these “virtual” branches just like callings in “physical” branches. Technology would not take the center stage nor substitute teachers; it would just be the means of extending the capabilities of the Church’s human resources.

Virtual Broadcasts of General Conferences

In the twentieth century only a small percentage of the Church membership had an opportunity to come to Temple Square and enjoy the experience and the inspiration gained through attending a general conference. Advanced imaging technology and laser-based communication capabilities might in the not-so-distant future allow increasingly larger numbers of Latter-day Saints to attend all sessions of general conferences as if they actually were in the future assembly building, without leaving their homes. They would be able to see, hear, and feel as if they were attending in person, even being able to choose from what angle they would want to watch the proceedings. They might also choose whether to watch the proceedings live or on a “video-on-demand” basis.

Emerging Technologies and Temple Work

A few years ago, in my twentieth century imagination I considered the advent of smaller temples (Martins, 1995.) I still remember the idea being dismissed by my audiences. Although I can’t envision the advent of “virtual temples,” I can still envision the endowment ceremony presented with far advanced visual technology, placing individuals virtually in the middle of the settings and actions. At first this may sound as strange to some of us, just as it must have sounded strange for late nineteenth century Latter-day Saints the idea of one day presenting the temple ceremony in a “moving picture.”

As far as number of temples, if we imagine one temple in each major city of the world--let's say, cities with a population of 100,000 persons or more, we could then easily imagine the existence of over 3,000 temples throughout the world. Advanced and ultra-fast means of transportation--the successors of our trains, buses, and automobiles--perhaps powered by magnetic levitation or other anti-gravity technology, would allow temple patrons to reach a temple 500-plus miles away in a trip of possibly no more than one or two hours.

While in missionary work we are required to baptize only the believers, in temple work we perform ordinances for all deceased persons above the age of accountability. That translates not only into billions of ordinances, but also into gigantic databases necessary to coordinate the work in all the world. Thus, the existence of thousands of temples in the future make perfect sense. Emerging technologies in crystal-based data storage in the form of light also bring us hope of fast and easily accessible worldwide databases of genealogical data and temple ordinance records.

Down to Earth: Possible Obstacles to the Realization of the Vision

After considering these exciting possibilities for the future, one must return to reality of the present and consider the plausibility of such vision. Besides the previously mentioned technical hurdles we might list as possible additional deterrents to the fulfillment of the vision: (a) fluctuations in the volatile global financial systems; and (b) “micro-wars,” or regional skirmishes within a single nation or between neighboring nations.

These were frequent problems throughout the twentieth century; nevertheless, one could argue that despite obstacles and setbacks many nations reached reasonable levels of development, all things considered. Although it is true that many areas of the world still suffer under chronic poverty and its consequences, in general these happen to be nations where the benefits of free markets and democratic regimes came very late, usually within the last 2 or 3 decades of the century.

As we study the establishment and development of democracies in the past 2 centuries, we notice that the democratic process appears to have life cycles and learning curves. The establishment of new democratic societies, especially in lieu of former autocratic regimes, require profound changes in political philosophies, public expectations, citizen participation, and international support. Until the first half of the twentieth century few democracies enjoyed the benefits of the combination of all these variables. In fact, the international community in general was until then more prone to support regimes that perpetuated old colonialist theories and ethnocentric values than to support democratic and egalitarian regimes.

If the new democracies of the late twentieth century receive the proper help—not only economic and financial but also educational—we might be able to predict an age of reasonable prosperity for each of those countries as well. By “reasonable prosperity” we mean the achievement of sufficient micro- and macroeconomic refinements that would enable these nations to offer its citizens satisfactory levels of healthcare, education, access to public utilities, and overall social contentment. The key to success lies in not expect all the world to enjoy the same materialistic lifestyle and associated high levels of ostentatious consumption of the larger industrialized nations.

With the global financial crisis of 1998 still fresh in memory some might question the plausibility of such a belief. After all, billions of dollars in basic and applied research would be necessary to make the technological marvels envisioned here come to life. In response to this concern we should remember that all the technological developments of the 20th century were achieved amid a great deal of obstacles: two world wars, an interminable series of micro-wars, great economic depressions, and global oil crises.

The Eye of Faith

At this point the sociologist yields the discussion to the high priest. From a purely secular standpoint one could just say that major adjustments would be needed in the global financial and political systems and laconically end this discussion. But since we are dealing with the divine charge to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ into all the world, we have to add unshakable faith to our study and explore in our vision further.

The Prophet Joseph Smith explained: “the whole visible creation, as it now exists, is the effect of faith” (Lectures on Faith, p.62). Since that is so, why not accept that our work in building the kingdom of God must also be the result of faith? Once we place our minds in such a frame, we turn to the scriptures to find specific promises which will strengthen our hope for a brighter future.

Finding Resources to Further the Kingdom

To begin, one must keep in mind is that God lives and that he alone has full control over the earth and the plan of salvation, not men nor their imperfect, transient, mortal governments.

President Kimball promised: “the Lord will open doors when we have done everything in our power.” (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p.587) The Psalmist wrote: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein” (Psalms 24:1). In a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord elaborated on this concept saying:

“I, the Lord, stretched out the heavens, and built the earth, my very handiwork; and all things therein are mine. And it is my purpose to provide for my saints, for all things are mine. ... For the earth is full, and there is enough and to spare; yea, I prepared all things, and have given unto the children of men to be agents unto themselves.” (Doctrine and Covenants 104:14-15,17)

When the Lord authorized king Solomon to build a magnificent temple in ancient Israel, a great deal of the construction materials came from foreign countries. Likewise, in the last days before the second coming we could expect the Lord to inspire many among his wealthy stewards throughout the earth to step forward and freely give of their substance—which is the Lord’s anyway—to help build the millennial kingdom of Christ. The Lord is God; he can inspire the leaders of the nations by way of dreams and

ministration of angels so powerful that they will feel constrained to act according to the will of the Lord. Why doubt that?

Early in this dispensation the Lord commanded the Prophet Joseph Smith to issue a proclamation to the kingdoms of the earth to help build a house to the Lord—the Nauvoo temple. At that time the Lord stated:

“This proclamation shall be made to all the kings of the world, ... to the honorable president-elect, and the high-minded governors of the nation in which you live, and to all the nations of the earth scattered abroad. Let it be written in the spirit of meekness and by the power of the Holy Ghost, which shall be in you at the time of the writing of the same ...

“For, behold, I am about to call upon them to give heed to the light and glory of Zion, for the set time has come to favor her. Call ye, therefore, upon them with loud proclamation, and with your testimony, fearing them not, for they are as grass, and all their glory as the flower thereof which soon falleth ...

“And again, I will visit and soften their hearts, many of them for your good, that ye may find grace in their eyes, that they may come to the light of truth, and the Gentiles to the exaltation or lifting up of Zion. ... Awake, O kings of the earth! Come ye, O, come ye, with your gold and your silver, to the help of my people ...”
(Doctrine and Covenants 124:3-7,9,11)

With this divine mandate in mind, the only real obstacles to the fulfillment of these things would be unbelief and unpreparedness. Therefore, we conclude that this is a time for faith, not doubt. The Church must prove to the Lord that it is ready and willing to move forward at rates so far considered unimaginable.

Preparing for the Future

Having discussed technological prospects and their potential benefits in speeding up the fulfillment of the mission of the Church, we now turn to the next logical question. What kind of steps—if any—could be taken now to help us prepare for that idealized but still likely future?

The Lord stated in the Doctrine and Covenants that in order to be prepared to magnify our callings in the world we needed to be “instructed more perfectly,” which suggests that one of the steps to our preparation is continuous education in a variety of secular subjects:

“... instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand; Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the

earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms” (Doctrine and Covenants 88:78-80).

Another aspect of our preparation for the future involves the financial dimension of the kingdom. The Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith that the land of Zion had to be acquired by purchase or by blood, and he immediately added that in this dispensation we are forbidden to shed blood (Doctrine and Covenants 63:29-31). Since we need proper food, shelter, clothing, and other basic necessities, and in today’s world these can only be obtained with money, our educational pursuits and professional careers become an integral part of the process of establishing Zion. That allows and justifies us in rightfully asking the Lord for his support in those apparently temporal or secular pursuits. All these things are spiritual to the Lord. It is up to the members of the Church to prove to the Lord that they are ready to receive the blessings and live up to the higher standards associated with those blessings.

But how can the Lord open doors—or satellite channels--abroad when Latter-day Saints sometimes don’t knock on their neighbors’ doors across the street? How can he entrust millions of converts to their care when they haven’t mastered the art of retaining the existing dozens in their neighborhoods?

Miracles Happen in All Areas of the “Mission Field”

Another important step in our preparation as a Church and people might be a better understanding of the spiritual tools we have available to do the work. We may be blessed in using these miraculous gifts in a much larger scale abroad after we have familiarized ourselves with their use in our own neighborhoods.

When using such terms as “the whole world” or “the mission field,” one may fall into the trap of thinking that these terms refer to far and exotic places in foreign lands. In reality, one must never lose sight of the fact that Utah, southeast Idaho, and other areas with large LDS presence are an integral part of the “whole world.” The term “mission field” has become a common expression in contemporary LDS discourse, usually signifying places in far away lands.

However, I propose an alternative definition to the term: the “mission field” is any place on earth where the three-fold mission of the Church is being implemented. In other words, the mission field is any place where there is a single soul yet to be baptized. Or any place where there is a single soul yet to be brought back into full fellowship or full activity in the Church of Jesus Christ. Or any place where there is a single soul yet to receive his or her own endowments in the House of the Lord.

Following this broader definition, the “mission field” is any place where there are individuals who still cannot trace their “priesthood family lines” all the way back to Father Adam and Mother Eve. And, in fine, the “mission field” is any place on earth where there are righteous persons yet to receive the confirmation of their calling and election and yet to be admitted into the presence of God.

With this broader perspective in mind comes the realization that one’s place of residence is where miracles should be expected to happen, and not only in some exotic far-off place. I consider the possibility that miracles do not occur more frequently because we often expect them to happen somewhere else. One can dream of being in exotic places preaching the gospel and performing miracles among a foreign people and become casual and unconcerned in his or her service across the street.

Occasionally, some may think that they are already strong enough in the faith, or that through some kind of “intergenerational fallout” they will always be active and strong in the kingdom. The scriptures do not substantiate such beliefs (See 2 Peter 3:17; Doctrine and Covenants 20:32-34; 84:43). As long as one has yet to be re-admitted into the presence of God, he or she should consider him or herself neither safe nor strong enough in the kingdom. Mutual service and prayers can be very effective in averting the effects of lethargy and spiritual apathy. Through mutual inspired teaching and nurturing we will learn those things that we are still unaware of and eventually get to spiritual heights within our reach but yet to be attained.

Future Spiritual Heights

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will always move forward under inspired leadership. Latter-day Saints in good standing cannot afford the luxury of falling under spiritual lethargy or apathy. Weekly church attendance without any expectation of either receiving or sharing additional light and knowledge, although acceptable under general standards, will not allow one to enjoy the full benefits of the Sabbath. One must constantly expect to experience the power of God in scripture reading or in “personal scripture writing” and in pondering and prayer. If we expect nothing spiritually new in our homes and neighborhoods, how can we expect to render miraculous service in Samoa, Russia, Nigeria, or China? If our individual religiosity is not “on fire” in our homes and home wards, how do we expect to kindle it in others abroad?

The time to move forward at an unprecedented rate appears to have arrived. In the future, church history scholars and members in general will certainly acknowledge the key role President Gordon B. Hinckley will have had in initiating and consolidating a push forward that will change the face of the Church forever. Looking at his inspired leadership so far, we see ample evidence of a “change in pace.” When one considers the number of new temples in construction, the many trips around the world--where over half of the Church membership had the chance to hear a sitting president of the Church

in person for the first time—and the candid interviews to the world media; when all these elements are considered, we can already see that President Hinckley is beginning to open doors that will take us to spiritual heights we have never perhaps even imagined possible. Soon we will see “heavenly floodgates” open and whenever that happens a formidable torrent of converts naturally follows (See Alma 23:1-7; Helaman 3:24-26; 5:48-52).

The future for those who strive to live righteously and serve the Lord is majestic, full of marvelous spiritual and temporal blessings, and meaningful callings and assignments. In the future, these callings and assignments will very likely involve teaching and nurturing millions of Church members and non-members in all parts of the world. The words from President Kimball seem to challenge us to look for the future with faith and courage: “The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities. We need men [and women] who can dream of things that never were and ask, ‘Why not?’” (Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball, p.487; brackets added).

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