

The Vitality of the Church in Pioneering

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In addressing the topic of pioneering in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I suppose some would expect me to comment on passages from the story of my family's conversion, so well recounted in the book *Saints, Volume 4* , for which inclusion I once again express my gratitude on behalf of my entire family.

But with that introduction, you're probably already guessing—and rightly so—that I'm not going to speak specifically about my family's conversion story.

As I said in a lecture sponsored by the University of Utah in 2018, after more than three decades of being invited almost exclusively to speak about my family's conversion, I "... began to decline invitations to speak on this subject," and have offered to speak about the results of my studies as the theme for my second book, titled "*The Priesthood: Earthly Symbols and Heavenly Realities*," [published in October 2025].

"And that pretty much sums up my personal position on the matter right now. The priesthood ban happened. It is and always will be part of our collective history as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But the ban [that existed until 1978] shouldn't be a major concern or have any significant effect on our present." ("Forty Years After the 40th Year: Expectations for the Future of Black Members in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" - BYU Maxwell Institute - October 12, 2018 – brackets added)

And the conversion of my family—and of many other families of African descent around the world before 1978—important and historically significant as they were, is not my preferred topic for lectures and devotionals.

Instead, I have focused on a few useful lessons for future generations of Church members throughout the world. Today, I will address just one of those lessons—the "vitality" of the Church.

Seventeen years ago, in a talk I gave in Orem, Utah, I proposed that "the vitality of the religion practiced by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is grounded in its extraordinary doctrines, in its ordinances revealed from heaven, and in the blessings, privileges, and promises contained in the covenants of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

"Underestimating any of these factors could compromise the lifeblood of the Church. Figuratively speaking, it is the sacred grove that attracts lifelong converts, not the handcart of the pioneers. Although the handcart is a symbol of an exodus based on faith, that faith began in the sacred grove.

"The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not true because its members crossed the plains of the United States in the mid-19th century. The Church is true because God spoke from

heaven, called a prophet in the modern era, and through this prophet restored his gospel and priesthood to the world.” (“Thirty Years After the ‘Long-Promised Day’: Reflections and Expectations “ - Orem Institute of Religion, Utah - February 29, 2008)

Nearly 40 years ago, President N. Eldon Tanner wrote:

“Pioneers are still needed. A pioneer is described as one who goes before, preparing the way for others. He is a leader, first in his field in discovery and invention. He will be followed by settlers and developers who expand and exploit his discoveries. Anyone seeking to become a pioneer will take care to fill his mind with what is known about the route he plans to take. Some of the qualities needed in pioneering are interest, intelligence, imagination, and determination. A pioneer must investigate, plan, experiment, and work.

As we pioneer into any endeavor, we have the benefit of those who have pioneered before us. We have the gospel plan to follow, which needs no experimentation, but we must plan and work to accomplish the goal we seek—eternal life.” (Ensign, July 1976 - Excerpts in the Liahona, July 1977 – The Liahona article in Portuguese contains only excerpts from the original)

These inspired words have been on my mind ever since I first read this article in the Ensign magazine in 1976, at a time when I was still a teenager without the privilege of receiving the priesthood. Nearly 50 years later, as a retired sociologist drawing on countless ecclesiastical and spiritual experiences, I continue to ponder President Tanner’s statement that “pioneers—those who go ahead, preparing the way for others—are still needed.”

We can thus expand the concept of “pioneering” to include all members of the Church at any time and in any place in the world, regardless of how long each one has been a member of the Church.

The trials of faith faced by new converts amply demonstrate their commitment to the restored gospel, and just as the 19th-century LDS pioneers provided a pattern of faithfulness for future generations through their obedience and sacrifice in crossing the American plains and building communities in then-inhospitable environments.

Modern pioneers—not just Black members converted before 1978 like my family, but also others in many nations around the world, including the United States—add yet another modern pattern of faith by joining the true faith even while not being able to fully enjoy its privileges, or while facing challenges of all kinds.

But these trials of faith are not limited to recent converts. Long-time members also demonstrate their commitment and pioneering spirit when they accept new callings—not only those involving leadership responsibilities, but, if I may say so, “especially” when they accept callings that some might consider to be “below” their experience and capacity. Such individuals demonstrate a pioneering spirit by showing others the way of humble service, without personal preferences.

In such cases, these members show by their example that “... *the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet*

favour to men of skill ...” (Ecclesiastes 9:11) , but as an angel told King Benjamin, of the Book of Mormon, the “race” is for those who “becometh [saints] through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.” (Mosiah 3:19 – brackets added)

Following this perspective, not only do callings provide opportunities for pioneering, but also any life challenges faced by Latter-day Saints, such as remaining faithful when some privileges and opportunities for service in the Church are not extended for a time—or even for a lifetime. Or when some solemn promise made by the Lord in a patriarchal blessing or some other prophetic blessing of counsel—even a blessing eagerly desired—is delayed or temporarily denied.

All who remain faithful and obedient even without the fulfillment of all the promised blessings will be considered “pioneers” or “models” for future generations. Again, quoting President Tanner:

“We express gratitude to our Father in heaven for the gospel, which shows us the way. We are grateful to all who were prepared and came forth to accomplish his purposes and establish his truths, which are the same yesterday, today, and forever.”

Each generation will face difficulties proportionate to and adapted to its environment and circumstances. Thus, if it is true that most of us, living at the beginning of the 21st century, might not withstand the stress and hardships of the early pioneers’ lives, it must also be true that most early pioneers would not withstand the stress and temptations of our contemporary urban societies. Therefore, any discussion of “who is better off” is not helpful. Each one was assigned while still in the pre-mortal realm to live in an environment and under a set of circumstances perfectly suited to their latent abilities and capacities acquired as premortal spirits (1 Corinthians 10:13). (“The Grove and the Handcart: The Pioneer Theme on the Threshold of a New Millennium,” unfinished paper, 1997)

From this perspective, the growth of the Church can also be seen as the sum of the spiritual and temporal growth of each of its members, and numerical growth can be seen merely as a natural consequence and a reflection of personal growth.

Consequently, the strength, truthfulness, and vitality of the Church would not be fully represented by its financial assets, real estate holdings, or even the number of converts or temples. As wonderful as all these things are, the true strength and vitality of the Church reside in the testimonies of the saints, received from on high by the power of the Holy Ghost and manifested in daily acts of humble obedience and sacrifice.

The power, majesty, and vitality of the Church can be seen in countless examples of humble members who sometimes make great sacrifices to diligently attend the hundreds of temples, despite financial difficulties and still significant distances.

The vitality of the Church is not merely in the existence of thousands of comfortable buildings, but rather in the inspiring lessons taught by ordinary people in those buildings, who, like the

Nephites of old, “... *left their labor to impart the word of God ... not esteeming himself above his hearers, for the preacher was no better than the hearer, neither was the teacher any better than the learner; and thus they were all equal, and they did all labor, every man according to his strength*” (Alma 1:26).

And the vitality of the Church may not be fully demonstrated in its past growth rates or in statistical projections for the future, but it is manifested whenever the members “... *impart of their substance, every man according to that which he [has], to the poor, and the needy, and the sick, and the afflicted*” (Alma 1:27 – brackets added), and when those same members, through simple and selfless acts of Christian service to their neighbors, “... *succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees*” (Doctrine and Covenants 81:5).

If we accept the idea that the growth of the Church is the sum of the spiritual and temporal growth of each individual member, then we can conclude that, regardless of location or circumstance, each member has a significant role to play in the future growth of the Church. Every prayer, lesson, ordinance, act of service, and obedience counts. Any such acts, performed anywhere, will produce spiritual results that transcend time and space.

It doesn't matter if the member lives in a large ward in Salt Lake City or in a small, newly established branch in Burundi. Paraphrasing the apostle Paul, we could say that “*[Americans] have planted, [many nationalities] watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase*” (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). (Based on an article for the December 30, 2000 edition of the Church News)

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