

What Can We Learn from the Mormons?

The conversations started in the Anabaptist Witness print edition don't end there. We continually publish new work on our blog and website that build upon and diversify the current issue's theme. The following piece is a continuation of the April issue's theme of encountering the religious "other", taking a look at aspects of the Mormon tradition from an Anabaptist perspective. Interested readers will also find a reflection piece featuring interreligious encounters - in this case, with a Mexican indigenous tradition - in the newly published, online-exclusive article "[Anabaptists: Peacemakers Incarnating Christ among Other Religions](#)" by Robert Thiessen. Further online content, including several new book reviews, can be found by [browsing](#) the table of contents.

Now, without further ado, let us turn our attention back to the Church of Latter Day Saints.

Mennonites and Mormons have some things in common. For example, we both suffered acute persecution during our beginning years. We currently both have strong concerns for family, moral living, missions and relief. What can we learn from each other? I would like to suggest six areas for study.

For four years Ardys and I lived across the street from a Church of the Latter Day Saints. I took the opportunity to speak with their elders, attend several worship services, listen to their missionaries and tour a new LDS temple.

While not agreeing with many of their teachings, I was interested in the way they do church and wrote to their headquarter offices requesting an appointment. I went to Salt Lake City and spent the day with a retired physician who took me out for lunch and with warmth and enthusiasm interpreted Mormon faith and practice. I found their relief program to be impressive. Their bookstore was well stocked with books and DVDs for use during their Monday night family nights. The wide-screen movie telling their history was exceptional. My guide highlighted their emphasis on the atoning work of Christ and how they are seeking to follow Jesus in daily life.

Ardys and I were placed in a model four-child home for a homestay. The family's evening meal was filled with meaningful dialogue including how the children were saving money to pay for their two-year stint of missionary work. After dinner, an elder came for his usual monthly visit asking, "Is there anything I can do to help you?" Before bedtime we gathered around the piano to sing a hymn, engaged in a short lesson on prayer and knelt in a circle for prayers.

Lest you think that I am being converted to the Mormon faith, let me assure you that I had several former LDS members in my congregation who kept me informed on the downsides of this faith. Serious errors in theology, a belief that they are the only true church, and the demands of the hierarchy were too much for them and for me.

In spite of these problems and cautions, what can we learn from the Mormon movement? Let me share six insights that I have gained from my interactions with leaders and members of the Church of Latter Day Saints.

Another way of doing pastoral care: An Elder for every Four Families

In many Mennonite churches the pastor(s) do most of the pastoral care. In my own ministry I championed small groups as the basic pastoral structure of the church. Mormon churches have neither paid pastors nor small groups but have designed a very effective form of caring for their people. Mormon churches have one elder for every four families! The elder visits each of the four homes once a month. In addition, he visits a fifth person or family that is “on the fringe.” “What do you do during a home visit?” I asked an elder. “I go prepared to teach one of our gospel principles,” came the response. “But even more important, I go prepared to do whatever is needed in that home. Sometimes that might be trimming a tree while at another time it is to comfort a member or to help a family make a difficult decision.” When I asked a teenaged member of our host family, the answer was “He sometimes shoots hoops with me.” “He takes interest in my schoolwork and friends,” said another. At the conclusion of a visit to our own home, an elder team offered pastoral care to us by asking, “Is there anything we can do to help you?” I had just purchased a printer for our computer and was having difficulty getting it set up properly. “Let’s take a look,” they offered with eager excitement. They helped me interpret the directions, crawled under my desk to connect the wires properly and within a short time had my problem solved. What can we learn from the Mormons? I believe we can learn new ways of offering pastoral care to each person and family in our congregations plus reaching out to those that are on the fringes.

Another way to share our faith: Go in Teams to Serve

Through interaction with Mormons I have learned anew how important and strengthening it is to work in teams. Just as Jesus sent out the 70 in Luke 10, so the Mormons send each other out to witness or to work through social media in teams of two. Currently they have over 25,000 teams serving in nearly every major city and country of the world. They have been growing by 40% per decade while all mainline churches have been in decline. Should we be anxious about this or see them as friends from whom we can learn? I believe that they have effective ways of sharing their faith from which we can learn. For example, a team of Mormon missionaries came to my home saying, “We have come not to find fault with you or to criticize you. We have come here as your brothers to say, ‘Keep all the good that you have, and let us bring to you more good, in order that you may be happier and in order that you may be prepared to enter into the presence of our Heavenly Father.’ ” They offered to share what they believe is life-giving in six story-telling sessions. Through observation and study of their practices, I believe we can learn how to effectively articulate our faith and share it in a non-offensive way.

Share what has been revealed: Invite Lay People to Share

Mormons strongly affirm that revelation did not cease with the prophets or with the closing of the biblical canon. They see the Book of Mormon as part of God’s revelation to us and look to the president of their denomination as a living prophet on earth. In addition, they have a special ordinance after baptism that they believe enables new believers to receive the Holy Spirit and to

be empowered to share revelations from God. Each Sunday, instead of a sermon, a youth and two lay speakers are invited to share in storytelling form what has been revealed to or experienced in their lives. At some time or another, everyone gets to share his or her faith and experiences in public. In some congregations the first Sunday of the month is announced as "Open Sunday" when anyone is allowed to share an insight or experience. On a Sunday that I attended, thirteen people went to the mike. The leader needed to close the sharing at the end of the hour. While I do not agree that the Book of Mormon is an equally revealed word from God, I do believe that God is still speaking and revealing his will to us. What can we learn from the Mormons? I believe we can learn how to involve our youth and adults in sharing their insights and stories of how they have experienced following Jesus in daily life. Signs and wonders are still happening today.

Another way to nurture our youth: Have a Class before School

While I attended three Mennonite schools and am strongly committed to them, I have learned that there are other ways of educating our youth in the Christian faith. Every weekday morning, about two-thirds of LDS high school youth in Kitchener-Waterloo gather at one of their churches for fifty minutes of prayer, fellowship and study. Recently I went to the local LDS church at 6:45 AM to attend one of these seminary classes. "We study the New Testament in year one, the Old Testament in year two, the Book of Mormon in year three, and the history and doctrines of the church in year four," they told me. I was impressed with the strong peer relationships that were apparent and at the quality of the teaching. Students who attend 80 percent of the classes over a four-year period of time are honored with a special graduation ceremony. Of those who graduate, 80% volunteer for two years of mission work. What can we learn from the Mormons? If we would follow their pattern, we could close our private schools and still with almost no expense nurture and train our high school youth in Mennonite Christian faith and practice while they were benefiting from the public school's music, sports and educational systems.

Another way of training church leaders: Sponsor Video Conferences

As an alternative to seminary education, Mormon churches twice each year have a Friday night through Sunday teaching conference that all members are strongly encouraged to attend. Via large screen media, the leaders of the denomination and effective missionaries teach the conference sessions. Between Friday night and Sunday afternoon, members hear up to thirty stories, reports and teachings. These, along with their monthly periodical, become the congregation's curriculum for the next six months. Typically, a youth will have a six-minute devotional for the congregation, a newcomer will have a twelve-minute presentation and a mature person or couple will have a twenty minute message for the congregation. The bishop of the congregation assigns the topics but allows the presenters to develop them according to their personal insight and experiences for presentation. The Mormons have no paid pastors and they limit each Ward or congregation to about 150 persons so that every youth and member can be given an opportunity to publically share their faith and experiences. What can we learn from the Mormons? We can learn that youth and lay members of the congregation will rise to the challenge if called upon to speak and given the resources to do so. Also, we can learn how to

utilize modern technology and the most gifted teachers and leaders of our denomination to train the leaders and members of our congregations,

A Ministry for every member: Discern each Member's Gift or Task

While visiting the bishop of the local Mormon congregation, I learned that they have no paid pastors or staff. All services of the church are done on a volunteer basis. The bishop of our local Mormon church is the owner of a successful business while also giving nearly forty hours per week to guide the church. He showed me a master whiteboard on which was listed every member of the congregation and that person's ministry. "We try to involve everyone according to his or her gifts and the needs of the congregation," he explained. Teenage boys serve communion while the girls assist in the nursery. Two teachers are identified and assigned for each age group. There is an elder for every four families or individual households in the church and those who take charge of the custodial and food service ministries of the church.

Do we dare to open ourselves to learn from a group that we have often seen as a cult? Do we dare not to? God has blessed this group with a high degree of dedication, creativity and growth. Might it be possible that God could use this group to help us to learn how to train and send our youth into mission and to know how each of us might be involved in a specific ministry?

It is my observation that for learning to take place we need to engage in honest risk-taking, joyful relationship-building and humble interaction that allows for laughing and crying together. When we see those who are different from us as friends rather than as enemies, the doors to learning begin to open. May God help us to that place.

Palmer Becker received his training from Goshen College, Mennonite Biblical Seminary (now Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary), Regent College, and Fuller Theological Seminary. He has spent a lifetime serving the church as a pastor, church planter, missionary, conference executive, author and educator. Becker has led many workshops on small groups, served as director of the Hesston College Pastoral Ministries Program, and most recently traveled extensively on teaching assignments to various international locations. He and his wife, Ardys, live in Kitchener, Ontario. They are the parents of four grown children.