Are Young People Leaving the LDS Church in Droves?

"Saving Faith: How Families Protect, Sustain, and Encourage Faith" by John Gee
Excerpts from Chapter 1: Hardly Perfect
(Excerpt and highlight selections by Cameron Ford)

Page 1

Elder Quentin L. Cook addressed this issue in the April 2015 general conference: "Some have asserted that more members are leaving the Church today and that there is more doubt and unbelief than in the past. This is simply not true."[3] As an apostle, Elder Cook has access to the Church's statistics that we do not. That however, does not mean that we do not have access to certain publicly available statistics. These statistics tell an interesting story that allows us to assess the validity of certain statements and figure out what we can and should be doing. The statistics show that while there is need for concern, there is not necessarily need for alarm. They also show that following the gospel and the counsel given by prophets and apostles for at least forty years is the best way to experience happy outcomes.

Pages 14-15

It is important to realize that the story about young people leaving the Church in droves is part of a particular narrative,[45] one that is largely untrue. Understanding this narrative is important to understanding what is really going on. The narrative about large numbers leaving the Church is often promoted by people who are somewhere in the process of leaving the Church. They may believe or hope that the narrative is true, but they promote it at least partially as a justification for their own actions. This narrative is also told not just about Latter-day Saints but about members of most faiths. For example, two researchers proclaimed that "however we measure it, every index of interest in, and the power of religion in the industrial liberal democracies of the West shows decline."[46] There is a widespread belief among Americans that churches are on the way out; 55% of Americans believe churches are "declining" and 42% believe that they are "dying."[47]

A recent longitudinal analysis by the Gallup polling organization trumpeted that church membership in the United States was down over the last two decades but also noted that the general picture was not true of Latter-day Saints, "Membership in a place of worship has been stable among Mormons (near 90% in both time periods) and Jews (in the mid-to-low 50% range in both time periods) over the past two decades."[48] The NSYR [National Study of Youth and Religion] was actually started because of scare claims rampant in evangelical circles that young people were leaving their churches in droves for alternative religions.[49] The NSYR found that such scaremongering was not justified: "U.S. youth are not flocking in droves to 'alternative' religions and spiritualities such as paganism and Wicca."[50] Another study addressed the issue: *"Young people are leaving the churches in droves!* This is so generally believed that nearly

everything written about it in periodicals such as *Christianity Today* is to explain why the exodus is happening and what can be done to reverse the trend."[51]

Pages 17-23

Part of the narrative is the rise of the "nones"—those who associate themselves with no religion. The nones are actually not a homogenous group, but a cluster of related groups.[73] They may consider themselves "spiritual but not religious." For example, although almost four out of five graduating college seniors think it is important to integrate spirituality into their lives, only about one in four attended religious services frequently, almost two in five never did, and fewer attended religious services by the end of their college careers than they did at the beginning.[74] "Though many students . . . profess an interest in 'spirituality,' most have no idea what to do about either spirituality and religion, or where to find resources for living a more spiritual life."[75] Accordingly, one in fifteen graduating seniors lost their faith while in college.[76] The problem, however, started earlier.

A survey of "3,680 students at 50 colleges at the end of their first year revealed that religious involvement (attendance at religious services, participation in religious clubs, prayer and meditation) had declined noticeably over the course of the school year" while the students "expressed more commitment to integrating spirituality into their own lives," indicating "a disturbing disconnect between students' expectations for their lives and reality." All told, "nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the students indicated that their religious or spiritual beliefs had been strengthened during the freshman year, even though more than 90 percent said their religious activity had decreased to some degree."[77] How do we explain the obvious disconnect between the students' claims and their behavior?

The disconnect between claims and behavior has been explained this way: "The world most [people] inhabit is both spiritual and religious at the same time,"[78] but "nonaffiliates and non-attenders . . . often used the language of 'spiritual but not religious' to describe themselves."[79] They borrow this language from certain conservative Protestants for whom empty 'religion' is rejected in favor of deep personal 'spirituality'.'"[80] Conservative Protestants use this language because they believe salvation is a personal affair (marked by spirituality) that is independent of a church (representing a religion). Those who neither attend nor affiliate with a church borrow this language to represent "a cultural rhetorical linking religiosity to hypocrisy and empty ritual while claiming that a good and caring life is the best form of spiritual connection."[81]

==What is appealing about 'spirituality' as opposed to 'religion' is precisely that it is undefined—spirituality appears to be a symbolic label adopted to free oneself from the moral obligations and rituals of tradition.==[82]

…

Thus when college students are claiming that their spirituality increased while their actual participation decreased, they "are equating 'religion' to the implausible beliefs and discredited institutions they have rejected. They are claiming 'spirituality' as a reasonable positive and generic category and one that each individual can fill with the content of her own choosing."[85] For them, the term *spiritual* thus becomes a generic positive category with no specific content. For many, "spirituality remains something of an unexamined black box—simply whatever religion isn't."[86] For others the term simply lacks meaning. One study reported that when they asked individuals if they were spiritual, they got responses like, "I haven't given it a thought. What do you mean when you say 'spiritual'?"[87] or, "Actually the word 'spiritual,' I'm not sure. I don't know how to answer that."[88] Scholars are also confused about what the term *spiritual* means.[89] Thus one researcher notes that most young adults who identify "primarily as spiritual often do little more than disassociate themselves from a religious upbringing that they now find oppressive—a way to wash away dogma and doctrine or what they regard as the fictional Santa Claus-like God of their parents, while at the same time retaining some affinity, however vague, with Meaning (whatever that is)."[90]

One fact lost in the discussion of the nones is that those youth who do not leave their religion tend to be more faithful. "Religious young people, even though they may be increasingly in the minority, tend to resist calls for secularist-oriented social relationships and have been crucial to revitalization efforts in many nations. They may have diminished in relative numbers, but these young people have been influential in calling for a return to, or increase in, religion to the public square, in conservative religious political mobilization, and in interfaith conflicts." What the rise of the nones reflects is "a growing divide between younger cohorts who participate in religious organizations and those who do not."[91] Others have argued that the rise of the nones "may result partly from long-term increases in divorce and their impact on intergenerational solidarity and religious formation."[92]

There is some support for the narrative, but its extent is exaggerated.

…

More Good Than Bad

The prevalence of a particular narrative about youth leaving the Church obscures a more important and more optimistic story. The truth of the matter is that we do lose some of our youth, certainly more than we would like. If you have lost anyone in your family, then you will feel that this is already too many. But we hold on to more of our youth than anyone else, even the secularists [atheists and agnostics]. There actually are a number of things we as a church are doing right, and these things appear when we start sifting through the data.

The results of the National Study of Youth and Religion[97] on how many youth keep their faith may be found in table 1.2. The first column of numbers represents the percentage of youth in high school who belong to the same religion as their parents. The second column represents those who kept their high school religion during their college-age years (whether or

not they actually went to college). The third column is a multiplication of those two percentages that gives the number of young adults who were raised in a religion that still belong to that religion in college years. The fourth number represents those in their college years who attend regularly. The fifth column is the number of those belonging to a particular religion that are in the devoted category in their college years. That means they are attending church every week, praying on a regular basis, and reading their scriptures at least once a month. The first, second and fifth numbers are from the NSYR and the third and fourth numbers are calculated from the NSYR data. The various religions are ranked in descending order based on what percentage of young adults were still members in their college-age years (third column).

Table 1.2 YOUTH RETENTION IN VARIOUS RELIGIONS OVER TIME

	High school youth in the same religion as parents (%)	College-age youth maintaining high school religion (%)	College-age youth keeping faith of childhood (%)	Regular attenders of college age (%)	Devoted college-age members (%)
Latter-day Saint	86	72	62	71	56
Conservative Protestant	86	64	55	34	15
Roman Catholic	83	66	53	21	2
Jewish	75	61	46	11	7
Black Protestant	81	55	43	19	6
Nonreligious	63	68	43	1	0
Other religion	57	72	41	25	15
Mainline Protestant	68	50	34	25	7
Indeterminate	45	10	5	21	5

See Note at end about NSYR data.

The bad news is that Latter-day Saints lose one in seven youth in high school and about twice as many in college. All told, we lost just over one-third of the youth by the time they are through with college. This is comparable with the results of the Pew Religious Landscape Survey.[98] Almost half of those are potentially in trouble since they are not devoted.

But the bad news cuts across the board. All religions are losing a substantial portion of their youth and young adults. Only Latter-day Saints, conservative Protestants, and Catholics are managing to retain more than half of them. Even if they keep them on the rolls, no religion other than Latter-day Saints can keep more than a third of their young adults in the pews.

But one should notice that the story is not that all these young adults are becoming atheists. Even the nonreligious lose more than half of their youth and young adults to some *faith*. The picture is much more complicated than we might simplistically think.

We bring in the other religions mainly as a comparison. I sincerely wish other religions were doing better. Our concern is with Latter-day Saints and our youth and young adult retention, not with how other religions are doing. As one observer reminded her fellow Christians, "Christian teenagers also have these [same] cultural tools at their disposal [as Latter-day Saint teenagers], but the *terms* for their use are very different," because "at some point, a peculiar God-story must set the terms for how teenagers use religion's cultural tools."[99] Our concern is with how we can keep our youth and young adults. We have the same cultural tools at our disposal as other Latter-day Saints in our branches, wards, and stakes. How can we more effectively use them?

The good news is that of those who stay Latter-day Saints, over half are in the devoted category and almost three quarters are regular attenders. We have proportionately almost four times as many devoted young adults as the next closest religion, and over twice as many regular attenders. One NSYR researcher termed Latter-day Saint youth as "the disproportionately devoted."[100] We keep more of our young people than any other religion. Fewer of our college-age young adults are vulnerable than those in other religions. In fact, the authors of the NSYR put it this way: "In general comparisons among major U.S. religious traditions using a variety of sociological measures of religious vitality and salience . . . it is Mormon teenagers who are sociologically faring the best."[101]

Why this is so does not necessarily reduce to a simple formula even if there are a few basic things that explain a great deal; some simplified explanations put forth for Latter-day Saint' success fall short of verification.[102] One evangelical researcher said, "It may be difficult for a 'gentile' or non-Mormon to read Mormon views on God, community, vocation, and eschatology without raising an eyebrow—but it is just as difficult to read the data on Mormon teenagers without feeling a hint of awe."[103] While "the majority of U.S. teens would badly fail a hypothetical short-answer or essay test of the basic beliefs of their religion," Latter-day Saint youth "seem somewhat better able to explain the basic outlook and beliefs of their tradition."[104]

A different study of emerging adults concluded that "Mormons scored higher on [intrinsic religiosity] than did Catholics or non-Catholic Christians."[105] This study concluded that the differences between the groups were a direct result of what was being taught—"people practice what is preached."[106] Another study of students at Latter-day Saint, Catholic, and secular universities found that "Mormons put stronger emphasis on the criteria for adulthood in the areas of interdependence, norm compliance, biological transitions, and family capacities. They also perceived themselves as having achieved the requisite criteria for adulthood to a greater extent than their peers in the areas of independence, interdependence, norm compliance, and family capacities. Furthermore, Mormons rated themselves higher on every variable aimed at assessing spirituality. Finally, Mormons reported engaging in very few behaviors typical of emerging adulthood (i.e., becoming drunk, drug use)." In short, "Mormon emerging adults appear far more likely to become adults who are in greater accordance with

their religious doctrine" than their secular or Catholic peers.[107] ==Any assessment of how the Church is doing on retaining its young people needs to account for the fact that we have been doing some things right—perhaps many things. It is not a matter of things not working—they clearly are; our youth retention statistics are the envy of all the other faiths (one of the NSYR books even has a chapter entitled "Mormon Envy")[108]—but of things not working as well as they might. We are hardly perfect, but we are doing better than we might think.==

Notes

3.   Quentin L. Cook, "The Lord is My Light," Ensign, May 2015, 65.
45. Philip, Cragun, and Kosmin, "Increasing Sex Ratio Imbalance," 9-12.
46. Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 149.
47. *American Views on Church Attendance* (Nashville: LifeWay Research, 2015), 5.
48. Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades," https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx
49. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5, 311-13.
50. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 31.
51. Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2015), 188.
73. *Relationships in America Survey*, 6.
74. Franke et al., *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the College Senior Survey*, 71, 64, 94.
75. Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 26; page numbers for this book refer to the electronic version.
76. Franke et al., *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the College Senior Survey*, 91.
77. Larry A. Braskamp, "Religious and Spiritual Journeys of College Students," in Jacobsen and Jacobsen, *American University in a Postsecular Age*, 127; Barry and Nelson, "Role of Religion," 246, 128.
78. Nancy T. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 49; Ammerman, "Spiritual but Not Religious," 259, 273-74.
79. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 49.
80. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 50; Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 152.
81. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 50.
82. Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 26.
85. Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, 51.
86. Ammerman, "Spiritual but Not Religious," 260; Bengtson et al., "Does Religiousness Increase with Age?," 373.
87. Bengtson et al., "Does Religiousness Increase with Age?," 372; compare Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 43-44.
88. Bengtson et al., "Does Religiousness Increase with Age?," 372.
89. Adam B. Cohen, June Gruber, and Dacher Keltner, "Comparing Spiritual Transformations and Experiences of Profound Beauty," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 2, no. 3 (2010): 127.
90. Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 36.
91. Hoffmann, "Declining Religious Authority?," 21, 22.
92. Christopher G. Ellison, Anthony B. Walker, Norval D. Glenn, and Elizabth Marquardt, "The Effects of Parental Marital Discord and Divorce on the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults," *Social Science Research* 40 (2011); 549.
97. From Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 36; and Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109, 304.
98. Stephen Cranney, "Who is Leaving the Church? Demographic Predictors of Ex-Latter-day Saint Status in the Pew Religious Landscape Survey," BYU Studies 58, no. 1 (2019): 100-101.

99. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 60.
100. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 46.
101. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 261.
102. For Example, Joshua Hart and Christopher F. Chabris, "Does a 'Triple Package' of Traits Predict Success?," *Personality and Individual Differences* 94 (2015): 216-22.
103. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 59.
104. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 137.
105. Kathryn A. Johnson, Adam B Chen, and Morris A. Okun, "Intrinsic Religiousity and Volunteering during Emerging Adulthood: A Comparison of Mormons with Catholics and Non-Catholic Christians," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 4 (2013): 848.
106. Johnson, Cohen, and Okun, "Intrinsic Religiosity and Volunteering," 850.
107. Barry and Nelson, "Role of Religion," 253.
108. Dean, *Almost Christian*, 45-60.

A note on the NSYR data from pages 4-5:

The NSYR data set has several advantages and some disadvantages that the reader should be aware of. One advantage is that it is publicly available in several published reports, and the raw data are also publicly available.[4] The information in those reports can be plowed through and pored over, dissected in ways the Church's internal statistics cannot.[5] (The Church has good reasons for not releasing that data to the public; even if I do not know all of them, I am satisfied by the reasons I can think of.) Some might also see the fact that the information was not gathered by the Church as a distinct advantage because they consider the Church's internal statistics to be biased or tainted in some way. I doubt that the Church's statistics are deliberately biased or tainted since it is in the Church's own best interest to have an accurate assessment of things as they really are.

Another advantage with the NSYR data set is its large sample size. A typical ward—if there is such a thing—might have a few hundred members and few dozen youth. A ward might have a few really good youth, a few with major problems, and a whole lot in between. A typical stake might have a few thousand members and a few hundred youth. The exceptional youth would stand out more than in the typical ward. It would take several stakes of the Church to have as many youth as were in the NSYR sample. The NSYR data set comprises the results of basically a whole stake made up of nothing but youth. That allows researchers to see the whole range of youth from the exceptional to the abysmal and everything in between. It allows them to see what is typical and what is unusual much more than a normal bishop or parent can.

A third advantage of the NSYR data set is that it was gathered in a longitudinal study. Rather than just taking a large sample at one point in time, it followed the same youth for over a decade into their young adult years, allowing us to see changes over time in the lives of youth, the harvest of the seeds sown in youth, and whether and individual's status improved or not over time or stayed more or less the same.

A fourth advantage of the NSYR data set is that its sample cut across society, allowing us to compare how youth from different religious traditions fared and to see the effect of different belief systems on the youth and young adults.

This last advantage, however, is also a disadvantage, at least from the perspective of considering Latter-day Saint youth. Because the sample was representative of the population at large, it is not as fine grained when it comes to Latter-day Saints in particular.[6] This provides a challenge when assessing where Latter-day Saints stand and what we should do about that stance. Sometimes the patterns of the NSYR data reflect the population as a whole and not the situation of the Latter-day Saints, which sometimes varies significantly from national norms, particularly in the area of sexual morality, but also, somewhat paradoxically, in obesity.[7] To be sure, the data of Latter-day Saints are contained in the larger data set but may not necessarily reflect the general trend. The data from the others in the study may simply swamp out the data on Latter-day Saints.

Notes

4. I was able to take advantage of the stored data available on the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.thearda.com) to do some analyses of the data that are not available in the publications. Citations to my own analysis of the data are cited as NSYR data, and I note which wave of the data my analysis comes from.
5. Some researchers complain about this. See, for example, Phillips, Cragun, and Kosmin, "Increasing Sex Ratio Imbalance," 6; and William S. Bradshaw, Tim B. Heaton, Ellen Decoo, John P. Dehlin, Renee V. Galliher, and Katherine A. Crowell, "Religious Experiences of GBTQ Mormon Males," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 54, no. 2 (2015): 315. For information on the Church's Correlation Research Division, see Handbook 2, §21.1.35
6. It appears that the total number of Latter-day Saints in the NSYR was 47; see Jonathan P. Hill, "Rejecting Evolution: The Role of Religion, Education, and Social Networks," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 3 (2014): 584.
7. Philip B. Mason, Xiaohe Xu, and John P. Bartkowski, "The Risk of Overweight and Obesity among Latter-Day Saints," *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 1 (2103):131-47.