

**Adaptation & Accommodation:
The Changing Face of Mormonism in Latin America
Implications for effective inoculation and evangelism
by Joel B. Groat**

Introduction

This paper will explore ways in which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (hereafter Mormon or LDS) has changed and is striving to change its image, and the presentation of its message in Latin America. Some changes have been gradual over the past 10-15 years, while others have taken place in the last 24-36 months. The changes are largely superficial in that they do not represent change in core beliefs or teachings, yet they do reflect adaptations meant to accommodate cultural norms and expectations.

The paper is divided into two parts. In part one I will first highlight Mormon growth in Latin America and then examine specific adaptations in the presentation of the basic Mormon missionary message within a Latin American context over the past 10 years. Then I will look at changes Mormons have made in the last few years in the way they run their temple open houses, and offer what I see as the significance of these changes and what has prompted them. This assessment is based on my attendance at 10 open houses in 7 different Spanish-speaking countries during the past 36 months, and resulting interaction with Mormon leaders, lay people and non-Mormons.

Part 1: Adaptation & Accommodation

A. LDS Church Growth in Latin America

The Mormon Church has boasted significant growth rates throughout Central and South America.

**LDS CHURCH GROWTH IN LATIN AMERICA
Membership Totals by Country**

	1991	2001	Growth	Percent
Argentina	153,000	288,865	135,865	88.8%
Bolivia	55,000	112,222	57,222	104.0%
Brazil	302,000	743,182	441,182	146.1%
Chile	266,000	502,153	236,153	88.8%
Colombia	76,000	129,105	53,105	69.9%
Costa Rica	13,000	30,118	17,118	131.7%
Dominican Republic	19,000	69,466	50,466	265.6%
Ecuador	70,000	146,420	76,420	109.2%
Mexico	570,000	846,931	276,931	48.6%
Paraguay	11,000	44,632	33,632	305.7%
Peru	159,000	333,828	174,828	110.0%
Uruguay	49,000	73,194	24,194	49.4%
Venezuela	48,000	89,484	41,484	86.4%
USA	4,175,000	5,113,409	938,409	22.5%

Source: *Deseret News Church Almanac, 1991-92, 2001-02*

The average rate of growth for the Latin American countries sampled is 12.3% per year compared with an average yearly growth rate in the USA of 2.3%. And while this is indicative of the number of people the Mormon Church is impacting with its message, it is not reflective of active members (which the LDS Church defines as attending 1 or more meetings per month). Mexico, in its year 2000 census, included “*Mormones*” as a religious category with 0.25% selecting this option – indicating that 243,500 Mexicans consider themselves Mormons (based on a population of 97.4 million).¹ This is considerably below the LDS Church’s reported figure of 846,931 members in Mexico at the end of 1999. The high rate of inactivity has important implications for evangelizing Mormons, and I’ll cover this in part two of this paper.

B. How the Mormon Church Presents Itself

I have come to my understanding of how the LDS Church presents itself to investigators and the general public in Latin America through a variety of sources. These include correspondence with LDS members (leaders, missionaries and lay people), former members and current investigators, and conversations with all of the above in various countries of Latin America. I’ve also had opportunity to examine press kits and articles written by the media in conjunction with LDS temple open houses, and attend various temple open houses throughout Latin America.

Perhaps the most noticeable shift is in the primary focus of the message. Rather than emphasizing Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon and the restoration, now the major stress is on faith, repentance, the centrality of Christ, and the unity of the family. The LDS church is presented as being the most reliable and complete source of information on those subjects. I recall a conversation with a man outside the new LDS temple in Merida, Mexico. His wife was taking the tour while he waited in the car with one of their younger children. It was evening and I and a group of Christians from several different evangelical churches were handing out literature to people as they left the temple area. He asked for a copy of what I was handing out, and several minutes later called me back over to the car. Obviously bothered by some of the contents, he asked about my motivation, so I explained my concern that the LDS church was a counterfeit religion that posed spiritual hazards for those who might be deceived by the message. He asked what I saw as the key to the gospel, so I presented the essentials of the gospel message and the need for repentance, faith in the sacrificial atonement of Jesus Christ and the resulting pardon and forgiveness. His frustration was palpable as he exclaimed, “But that is exactly what the Mormon missionaries have been teaching me and my family! How am I supposed to know who is right when you are talking about the same things!”

It was not an easy question to answer, but it is an issue that must be addressed if we are to effectively present the gospel to those who have been impacted by LDS teachings. The second part of this paper will explore some of those answers.

Mormon missionaries place a secondary (albeit important for them) focus on Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and a superficial treatment of LDS history. The idea of a boy prophet seeing

¹ Jeanette Becerra Acosta, “La fe de los mexicanos, bajo vigilancia de Washington,” *Milenio semanal*, edición 221, Diciembre 9 de 2001, [www.MilenioSemanal.com].

visions of God and Jesus fits comfortably into a culture and society where “la Virgen de Guadalupe” is revered as much if not more than Jesus himself, and were claims of spiritual apparitions are viewed as evidence of heightened spirituality rather than uninformed credulity. There is also increased selectivity in presenting LDS doctrine. For example, missionaries are very comfortable speaking openly of our pre-existence as sons and daughters of God as this plays well in Latino culture, as does the concept of “priesthood authority” and “families forever.” However, references to the teaching that God was once a man like us, men achieving godhood, the essential nature of temple ceremonies for eternal life, and the results of apostasy appear to be deliberately avoided and even denied.

There is an extreme emphasis on feelings and subjective experiences as validation and confirmation of truth. While this is true of the LDS system as a whole, it finds fertile soil within a culture that is very accepting of the subjective, and where many people lack time, interest or ability to read. The Mormon Church capitalizes on this aspect of Latino culture assuring people that truth will *feel* right when they hear it, to the point they have little need of even the Bible. Veronica, a 24 year-old who recently returned from serving a mission for the LDS Church wrote us the following:

Y así mismo sé, como vivo y respiro hoy, que La Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Últimos Días, a la cual conocéis como mormones, es la única iglesia verdadera sobre la faz de esta tierra, y que es la única que no necesita realmente de la Biblia para ser una iglesia, ya que todo aquello que se encuentra en la Biblia nos lo es dado por medio de la revelación moderna.

And in the same way I know, as I live and breathe, that the CJCLDS, whom you know as Mormons, is the only true church on the face of this Earth, and is the only one that does not really need the Bible to be a church, since everything found in the Bible is given to us by means of modern revelation.²

While my wife and I and several national Christians were distributing literature in Caracas, Venezuela, a cosmopolitan city of nearly 4 million, national LDS leaders sought to hamper our literature distribution to people as they left the open house. First they attempted police intimidation (we needed a permit and got it), and then deception (they sent LDS youth to pose as investigators to ask for multiple copies of the tracts and had them bring them back to the temple grounds to toss them in the trash.) Later in the day, several of them came down the street to talk to me personally, and failing to intimidate me or shame me into leaving finally announced, “Why do you bother, nobody reads anyway. No one will even take the time to look at this, you are just wasting your time here. Hardly anyone in this country reads.” To which I replied, “Then you shouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

LDS missionaries have apparently added more verses to their repertoire to provide additional biblical support for a subjective approach to truth. In several countries these young men have explained to me that Galatians 5 – the fruit of the Spirit such as love, joy and peace – gives examples of the feelings we get when the Spirit is present. Interestingly, no mention is made of meekness, temperance or long-suffering in this context.

Another sign of accommodation to Latin American culture is a downplaying of the seriousness of leaving the LDS church for a[nother] Christian church, or even regular attendance by an

² Email sent to espanol@irr.org on February 13, 2002.

LDS member at a Christian church. It appears, at least among some LDS congregations, that such actions are not considered apostasy nor do they necessitate breaking off family relationships. I was very firmly set straight by an LDS young woman in Guadalajara last April. She and her husband inadvertently attended one of my conferences in the Nazarene church they regularly attend. Because I'd been invited the day before by the Pastor, no one in the congregation knew I was coming. At the close of my presentation on Mormonism, I sat down beside the pastor who leaned over and said, "Did you notice the young man who asked the last question on how to evangelize Mormons?" I nodded in the affirmative, to which the Pastor smiled and said, "His wife is beside him and she is a Mormon. I don't think she is very happy." At that point your whole presentation flashes before your eyes. A few minutes later, once the service was done, I walked back to where she and her husband were standing and introduced myself, asking if there was anything she thought was inaccurate or misrepresentative. The only thing she disagreed with was my description of the treatment of "apostates" and explained that her whole family had been LDS for sometime and that in their ward they had never been told it was wrong to go to another church, in fact, her LDS mother approved of her attendance at the Nazarene Church and wanted her younger LDS brother to start going there because he was no longer attending the LDS church, and an evangelical church was much better than nothing. She went on to say that even if she left the LDS church she would not be considered and apostate.

This is in keeping with other comments LDS people have made to me, indicating there is a continual blurring of the lines. One man who participated for a while in our chat group for Spanish-speaking Mormons and former Mormons, took issue with a discussion on evangelizing Mormons, saying "you can't paint white what is already white." In a later post he took issue with the distinction of "Cristiano evangélico" from Mormons, saying that Mormons were "evangélicos." Evangelical missionaries in Latin America have made the same complaint to me, that Mormons purposely lead people to believe that the Mormon Church is an "evangelical" church. However, other Mormons I've surveyed said they recognized a clear distinction between "los evangélicos" y "los mormones."

Perhaps the most disturbing development I've witnessed is a repeated and deliberate blurring of the grace - works line and what part one's works play in the overall scheme of salvation. I believe it is a result of the LDS church seeing the growth of evangelical churches in Latin America with its emphasis on the free grace of God and his love and mercy that saves sinners and transforms lives. Assembly of God and Pentecostal campaigns, as well as Luis Palau crusades, draw thousands to civic auditoriums or stadiums where this message is preached, and received gladly by people who both recognize and openly acknowledge their sinfulness. And yet, the Catholic tradition of works, of meriting and earning what one receives from God, is a strong and powerful undercurrent in Latin American society. The LDS church has tapped into the evangelical emphasis on grace, atonement, and forgiveness, Christ's great passion and suffering for our sins, and yet placed alongside it the mandatory LDS rules and temple rituals which resonate with those accustomed to Catholicism's similar emphasis. So works become an indispensable part of the equation for obtaining forgiveness and eternal life – they are that which "proves" one has faith, so that faith and belief become synonymous with obedience to Mormon-specified regulations. The result is incredible confusion of terms, definitions, and the application of the Scriptures that speak to these areas. Couple this with centuries of the Bible

being a closed or unnecessary book to the lay catholic, and is it any wonder many searching people fall easy prey to the LDS system, including those who may be new believers.

The final key element in the LDS Church's presentation of itself to non-members is a growing willingness to deny the clearly non-Christian Mormon doctrines. Some of the doctrines I have had denied to my face by Latin American LDS leaders are:

- Mother in heaven
- God as an exalted man
- God the father as the literal earthly Father of Jesus
- Temple ceremonies as indispensable for exaltation
- Eternal life in presence of Heavenly Father only available to members of the LDS church

In most cases, this was not due to ignorance of LDS teaching, but an attempt to keep up the Christian façade in front of unformed members or investigators that were listening in on the conversation or had been exposed to our literature. On numerous occasions an LDS bishop or quorum president or councilor to the bishop or stake president would vehemently deny any of the above LDS teachings, right up to the point where I would take out my triple combination of the Mormon Scriptures, or *Gospel Principles*, or *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, in Spanish. Once the leader knew I knew, and could document it, the denial switched to rationalizations for why the doctrine was important and in fact logical and biblical. It was also usually at that point, that any LDS young men who had been listening in on the conversation were sent or escorted away by the leaders to "get back to their jobs or volunteer posts."

It became very clear as I interacted with LDS people throughout Latin America, that key to the LDS church's success was extensive information control. This has enabled Mormon leaders to position themselves as closely as possible to the Christian mainstream. Leaders of the LDS Church desire the legitimacy and approval afforded "Christian" churches, as this will certainly assist their proselytization efforts. It is very important then that they do whatever they can to be accepted as a "Christian" church. Current Mormon prophet and president of the Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, stated the following in a General Conference talk:

Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of nonmembers have attended the open houses associated with these new temples. They have done so with reverence and respect. In many cases, the temples are, without question, the finest buildings in the cities in which they are located. People marvel at their beauty. *But among many things, they are most impressed with pictures of the Savior they see in these holy houses. They will no longer regard us as a non-Christian people.* (Emphasis added)³

It is important to be aware that while LDS leaders are willing to deny their non-biblical teachings in order to achieve mainstream status, they have not changed them.

³ Gordon B. Hinckley, "Welcome to Conference," *The Ensign*, November 1999, p. 5.

C. Changes in Public Relations Strategies during Temple Open Houses

It has been interesting to watch how the LDS church has handled new temple open houses in Spanish-speaking countries. The first open house I attended was in Madrid, Spain in Feb/Mar. of 1999. I was part of a team of 6 people who distributed literature to the thousands of people attending the open house, and all indications were we caught the LDS church by surprise. While there were public announcements of the open house on everything from TV to city buses, there appeared to be little information supplied to the media. Non-members attending the open house knew little about what to expect, and therefore were glad for the information we offered and often stopped to ask us questions about the Mormon church and their beliefs. The LDS church responded by repeatedly calling the police and falsely accusing us of violating an anti-litter ordinance, sending leaders out to talk to us in an attempt to first intimidate us into leaving, and then to persuade us out of respect for their members who were being confused and upset by the pamphlets. However, when one leader ended up taking a different tract that had issues he was unaware of so he could study it for himself, his superiors immediately reassigned him to a job inside the temple gates.

The first temple open houses in Latin America in 1999-2000 followed a similar pattern – where little information was provided in the media to the general public before the start of the open house. However, prior to the open houses in Montevideo, Uruguay and Guadalajara, Mexico in 2001, the LDS Church paid to have a 16-page newspaper insert with a color cover included with a major newspaper in each city. This insert featured among other things: the open house schedule and a map on how to get there, pictures of the LDS leaders and temples, several pictures of Jesus, and articles on the divinity of Christ, the beliefs of the LDS Church, families being forever, LDS temples around the world and LDS reasons for building temples.

Other changes included:

- The switch from silent walking tours of temples to guided tours with explanations provided by guides.
- A change from making no attempt to justify unique LDS doctrines like baptism for the dead, to a willingness to use historical and biblical misinformation during guided tours to bolster Christian appearance. At the last open house I attended in Guadalajara, our guide stood by the baptismal font and explained that the Apostle Paul had written 1 Corinthians to the Sadducees who practiced baptism for the dead, but did not believe in the resurrection.
- A switch from having a reception and refreshments for press / VIP tours only to refreshments and reception area for general public.
- Going from making no attempt to identify non-members, to asking non-members to raise their hands and tagging them with a bright colored sticker on their clothing.

I believe these changes stemmed from:

- A need to improve how the general public perceived temples and the LDS church. It was common to hear non-members comment that the LDS temple was much more like a 4 star hotel than a temple, that they were an extravagance, and the money should go to the poor, etc.

- A need to diminish the public's desire for more information following the temple tour, since the general public was very appreciative of our presence with free additional information. People left the tour wanting to know more, and they would stop and ask Christian volunteers questions about the purpose of the temples and what went on inside.
- The need to have the greater/broader community perceive them as Christian *before* the Open House started.
- An attempt to counter the information they now knew was contained in the literature, especially where practices like baptism for the dead were exposed as unbiblical.
- A willingness to engage in more aggressive proselytization of visitors.

2. Implications for Effective Inoculation and Evangelism

A. Inoculation of Believers

The Mormon Church's attempts at cultural accommodation and adaptation require us to take deliberate steps in preparing believers to encounter Mormons and those who've been impacted by their message.

1. ***Prepare Christians for what biblical texts are misused by Mormons.*** As Mormon missionaries employ additional biblical references to enhance their message and presentations, we need to be aware of what the key texts are and how they are taken out of context. Once a believer understands the context of verses like Amos 3:7 and James 1:5 he will not accept the LDS spin placed on them to justify the Mormon doctrine.
2. ***Avoid use of outdated resources or "urban legends" when educating people on Mormonism.*** Now I know none of us here would do this, but I have been amazed at how many in Latin America still use *The Godmakers* book and video as their primary source of information or how many people think the Mormon Church still practices racial discrimination. Perhaps worse is when Christians spread rumors and urban legends about the Mormons in an attempt to discredit them or make them look bad. In almost every conference I could count on being asked one or all of the following questions: Do the Mormons have a controlling interest in Pepsi or Coca Cola; do members of the CJCLDS still endorse the practice of polygamy; is it true Mormons consummate their temple marriages in the temple in front of a Mormon leader; and is there a secret, basement level in every Mormon temple used to practice Satanic rituals. When Christians provide misinformation to friends and neighbors, or tell a Mormon his church is racist, it both diminishes the credibility of the Christian and enhances the LDS position, for they are extremely adept at playing the "persecuted and much maligned" card. We need to encourage discernment, and discourage repeating unverified information simply because it makes the LDS church look bad.
3. ***Prepare Christians for the heavy appeal to a subjective truth test.*** This is especially important in Pentecostal and Charismatic circles of believers where experiences can take precedence over sound doctrine. It is essential that Christians know how to critique and evaluate the Mormon emphasis in this area, especially when it comes to accepting Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon and the LDS Church based on an application of the Moroni 10:4 test. Is it okay to pray about the Book of Mormon? When an LDS missionary or friend or relative presses you to take the Moroni 10:4 test how should you

respond? Do we understand the balance between the objective Word and the subjective witness of the Spirit? Contrary to what many LDS people believe we are not pure rationalists.

4. ***Avoid presenting only the most radical or shocking doctrinal and historical facts to Christians for inoculation purposes.*** While Christians do need to be made aware of the radically unbiblical nature of Mormonism, including doctrines such as God the Father has a wife with whom he procreates spirit children, and Jesus as the literal offspring of God's physical relations with Mary, these will be unknown to most LDS converts they may encounter. It is important Christians be inoculated with a balance of material that prepares them for encountering Mormon converts that are part of the softer, gentler Mormonism of today. Christians who begin their critique with these radical doctrines in a kind of "shock" evangelism will understandably be met with reactions ranging from incredulity to denial, as most new converts to the LDS church know little to nothing of these teachings.
5. ***Take into account the LDS conversion process when inoculating believers.*** There are common steps that most LDS converts go through. There is also often a significant social / emotional element to the person's decision to join the LDS Church. When Christians understand these steps, and the common aspects of the conversion process, they will tend to be much more understanding and compassionate toward the Mormons they encounter.
6. ***Avoid presenting a "silver bullet" approach on how to reach Mormons.*** Far better to prepare people to settle in for what could be a long, difficult and often frustrating process. There are no fail-safe methods, there are no sure-fire techniques. Taking an approach in which we treat Mormons as people first, LDS church members second, can free us to love them instead of being fearful of potential conflict.

B. Evangelism of Mormons

Because of the Mormon Church's extensive and ongoing adaptation of its message and methods there are some key things to keep in mind when we approach LDS church members, especially those in Latin America, with the gospel.

First, we can no longer assume because a person is "Mormon" they believe certain things. A new convert's doctrinal knowledge is far less important than his sense of well-being within "The Church." Therefore, the LDS church appears to put little emphasis on teaching new converts the unique doctrines, especially those that would readily mark them as "non-Christian." Be ready and willing to start where the Mormon is at, and take time to find out what her beliefs are.

Second, we should look for points of common ground doctrinally — and there are likely to be more now than ever before — especially if the Mormon is a recent convert from an evangelical church. Man's sinfulness, God's holiness, our inability to achieve perfection on our own, or make ourselves worthy of God, all are areas that most Latin American Mormons will agree with us on. They can be effective starting points and offer opportunities for non-confrontational dialogue. As Jon Trott pointed out in a recent *Cornerstone* article:

Religious researcher Gordon Melton and others have suggested adopting a missionary approach, or what is called a missiological paradigm, in dealing with NRMs [New Religious

Movements]. This puts us on similar footing, one less rooted in power-loaded words and more rooted in mutual respect and a common desire for a transcendent life. ... Love in word is nice; but love in deed is stunning, winsome, and (yes) sometimes repulsive to those experiencing it. But our approach to other belief systems needs to exhibit love.⁴

I witnessed the truth of this first hand as I talked with a young Mormon guy, probably 16 or 17 years old, at length in Caracas. He took a tract, looked it over, and came back to ask questions and defend the validity of the Church and historicity of the Book of Mormon. He was very sincere and intelligent, and while at times a bit belligerent, the Lord gave me an incredible compassion toward him and responses to his questions that I offered in a calm but direct manner. He was not happy with my answers, but asked question after question for 20 or 30 minutes, until the open house ended and it was time for me to check in with other volunteers working further up the street. As we walked he continued to talk and ask questions and I was feeling like there was little use in further conversation, nothing seemed to be getting through. When we reached the end of the street and were close to the entrance of the temple grounds, he asked me why we were doing this. I explained my great concern for his soul, that I saw him as a sincere seeker, but one who was being led down the wrong path. He seemed ready to leave and go back into the temple area, so I told him my name and asked him what his name was. He replied, "I don't want to tell you." I said that was fine, I'd enjoyed talking to him. As I turned to walk away, he asked "Why do you want to know my name?" "So I can pray for you," I said. He replied, "That's what I thought. I don't want you to pray for me, you have a strange sort of power about you and I don't want you to be praying for me." Well, I did pray for him even without knowing his name.

Third, be aware of the fact that many Mormons in Latin America accept evangelical Christians as "brothers" (after all we were in the preexistence together). We can capitalize on this to establish a more relational approach to witnessing. There is no need to alienate people unnecessarily. On numerous occasions while standing down the street from a Mormon temple handing out literature, a Mormon leader would come and strike up an affable conversation. Rather than rebuff the person, I welcomed the friendliness and responded in kind. More often than not, this led to real dialogue and opportunities to share why I was doing what I was doing. It also had the positive side affect of reducing greatly the confrontations from LDS people upset by the literature distribution, because after all, Bishop Gonzalez was talking to me like I was a long lost friend, so if he was not upset, why should they be. Hey, Bishop Gonzalez even has a tract in his hand, so they may as well get one too.

Finally, we need to be aware of the high levels of inactivity within the Latin American LDS community (only 25-30 % of converts remain active after the first year or so). Even though they no longer attend the Mormon Church, many of these people continue to have friends or relatives in the LDS religion, and if they feel the LDS Church is being unjustly attacked, will come quickly to its defense. They are, however, also very open to spiritual alternatives. There are a growing number of people like Jessica Sanchez who wrote us recently to say:

I've been LDS for about 7 years. During this time going to the church I've discovered some things that do not agree with what I learned and read in the Bible. The information you provide is very useful and hopefully I'll be able to get more about the Mormon Church.

⁴ Jon Trott, "Reconceptualizing the Word Cult," *Cornertone*, vol. 30, issue 122, p. 34.

I decided to stop attending the church (a little more than a month), for the same reasons, and believe me, it is hard to accept that everything in it is not true ... even more so when there is trial involved, and believe me it is hard. If only you could help me get more information about the church I would appreciate it, for the time being I'll keep looking on the internet for more on this subject. (translated from Spanish)⁵

How open will Jessica be to any local evangelical church if the first Christians she encounters who find out she is Mormon, attack her with the most scandalous and salacious arguments they've heard (true or false) about the LDS church? While the LDS Church's constant adaptations pose a significant threat to seekers and new believers in Latin America, it also presents tremendous opportunities for Spirit-filled, compassionate Christians to reach out to LDS-impacted people with truth and love. I personally believe the Latin American Christian community is where the North American Christian community was 15-20 years ago in relation to the LDS Church. It is becoming more aware and concerned with LDS inroads, and has a growing body of information to counter Mormonism. It has the opportunity to inform both within and without the community, and a balanced, respectful approach will earn it the right to share this truth in a way that advances the kingdom of Christ and positively impacts the surrounding society and culture.

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