

Latter Day Saints Movement

***Summary:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known for many years as the Mormon Church, is the largest movement descended from the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith. In the mid-19th century, the Church moved from upstate New York, Smith's home, to the West, eventually reaching Utah where Mormons founded Salt Lake City. Through the present day, members of the church continue to negotiate their place within Christianity and American society.*

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS Church, is the largest denomination in the broader “Latter-day Saint (or Mormon) movement,” a restorationist Christian movement that sprang from the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith (1805-44) and coincided with the Second Great Awakening in the United States. Today, the movement includes the LDS Church, the Community of Christ, and a number of other smaller groups. Like many other restorationist groups, the Latter-day Saints church believed that existing Christianity had strayed so far from Jesus’ teachings that they required a complete renewal rather than simple reform. While many restorationist movements (like the Stone-Campbell movement or the Puritans) were content to model as closely as possible the religion of the New Testament, Joseph Smith taught that the Bible itself had been corrupted.

Joseph Smith organized his church (originally called the Church of Christ) in 1830 in upstate New York, where he had been experiencing divine manifestations since he was a teenager. From the beginning, the church suffered derision and persecution for both exclusivity and innovation. Smith claimed that he alone, because of his encounter with God and Jesus Christ and his subsequent interactions with angels, could teach correct doctrine and possessed proper priestly authority to administer baptism or to ordain other men to the priesthood. At the same time, the most important symbol of Smith’s restoration was the Book of Mormon, which Smith claimed to have translated through divine inspiration from golden plates left by an ancient American Christian civilization. For believers, the volume was a revealed companion to the Bible, filling in its gaps and affirming Christ’s divinity. Other Americans, however, felt the Book of Mormon was a blasphemous replacement for the Bible and thus evidence that Smith’s restoration was un-Christian. They coined the term “Mormon” to designate Smith’s followers. Although initially pejorative, the term was eventually embraced by the church. However, in 2018, the head of the church decreed that members should no longer refer to themselves as Mormons or shorten the church name to

LDS. This was a major shift for a community who had for decades been accustomed to proudly referring to themselves as Mormons.

As a result of the persecution he and his flock faced, Smith led his followers from New York to Ohio (1831), then from Ohio to Missouri (mid-1830s), and finally from Missouri to Illinois (1839). As the church population grew, bolstered by an influx of immigrant converts from Europe, their insularity attracted additional suspicion from their neighbors. In 1838, 10,000 members of the Latter-day Saints community were forced out of Missouri by a mob that was assisted by the state's militia, under the direction of the governor. They fled to a town Smith named Nauvoo, Illinois.

While in Nauvoo, Smith served as mayor, commander of the city militia, and ecclesiastical leader. There he instituted the most distinctive theological marks of Mormonism: the doctrine of human divinization and the practice of polygamy. Though he hoped to keep the latter a secret, rumor soon gave way to dissent and eventual exposure, leading to both internal and external conflict. In 1844, Smith was killed by a mob.

Smith's death led to a fracturing of the Latter-day Saint movement. Several sought the mantle of prophetic leadership, with some claiming visions and producing scripture in imitation of Smith. These competing claimants led some small groups to leave Nauvoo while others left the city under the pressure generated from this discord. Over the next fifteen years, various small Latter-day Saints churches appeared across the Midwest and then vanished. When Joseph Smith III, the son of the movement's founder, assumed leadership of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1860, many of the scattered returned. Headquartered in Independence, Missouri, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was renamed the Community of Christ in 2001.

The majority of the Latter-day Saints church members in Nauvoo followed Brigham Young, the president of the church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Young believed that his community would never find peace within the United States. He led many followers to the valley of the Great Salt Lake in the West where he founded Salt Lake City. This Mormon Trail allowed for a constant stream of European immigrants to travel west until 1869 when the railroad reached the city. Young became governor of the U.S. territory of Utah in 1850 and governed Utah the same way Smith had governed Nauvoo: creating a theocracy by blending the church's hierarchy and civil authority.

As the 19th century wore on, multiple U.S. presidents and members of Congress tried various strategies to force Mormonism to conform to 19th century American moral and political norms, particularly after 1852, when the church formally admitted the practice of plural marriage. In 1857 the U.S. Army entered Utah to monitor the church's involvement in territorial governance and removed Young as governor; in the 1880s and 1890s, Utah suffered repeated raids by federal marshals seeking to suppress polygamy. Finally, in 1890 the president of the Latter-day Saints church, fearful that the government would disincorporate the church and seize its property, announced that the practice of polygamy would cease. Six years later, Utah was admitted to the Union.

The 20th century saw various Latter-day Saint churches seek increased integration into the United States and broader American culture. By mid-century, the church had embraced distinctly conservative social and theological positions and had rapidly expanded into the global south. Of the roughly 15 million members of the church today, about 8 million live outside the United States. The Community of Christ, in contrast, never adopted the doctrinal or social practices Joseph Smith instituted in Nauvoo and has sought common cause with liberal Protestantism, discarding much of the exclusivism and emphasis on the authority of the priesthood that today characterizes the Latter-day Saints church. At present, the Community of Christ branch of Mormonism claims approximately 250,000 members.

In the early 21st century, two high profile political campaigns attracted focus to the Mormon movement: the 2012 presidential campaign of Mitt Romney, a Republican and member of the Latter-day Saints church, and the church's 2008 involvement in the Proposition 8 campaign to ban gay marriage in California. In recent years, the church has fostered an upbeat and positive public image by emphasizing the church's diversity, commitment to strong families, and charitable efforts. The 2011 "I'm a Mormon" publicity campaign highlights members of the church who are of diverse ethnic and professional backgrounds, earnestly testifying of the benefits membership in the faith has fostered. By 2012, the church was growing at a rate of approximately 3 percent per year. Its growth has since slowed; the church's 2018 statistical report showed a 1.21 percent expansion in membership for that year.