

Cultural Immersion Project: Research and Events

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Abstract

Effective counselors are aware of multicultural differences among their clients. Various backgrounds, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and culture affect the worldviews of individuals. To better serve these individuals and prevent biases, it is necessary for counselors to educate themselves regarding clients' values and beliefs. Religion plays a significant role in the development of these worldviews. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is a prime example of a religion that places considerable emphasis on the morals and perspectives of its members. It would benefit Utah counselors to identify characteristics, attitudes, customs, and key historical figures and experiences, as well as participating in religious events, to gain valuable insight into this dominant Utah religion.

Keywords: culture, immersion, Latter-Day Saints, LDS, Mormon

Cultural Immersion Project: Research and Events

As time progresses, professional counseling organizations and ethical codes are placing considerable emphasis on applying cultural perspectives when working with multicultural populations (Corey et al., 2019). Counselors must be aware of their own worldviews and the worldviews of their clients when building an efficient counseling relationship. One way a counselor can become aware of alternative belief systems is to education him or herself on clients' cultural backgrounds. To do this, it is beneficial to immerse oneself in the culture or religion to become competent regarding the characteristics, values, and perspectives of various cultures. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) comprises 2.1% of the nation's population (LDS Living, 2021). To better understand this minority religion, in depth research and cultural immersion is necessary.

Research: Beliefs and Values

When researching the LDS religion, also known as Mormon in some regions, it is important to note the community's beliefs and values. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, a Christian is an individual who believes in the teachings of Jesus Christ (2022). Mormons consider themselves Christians. Their church is the restoration of the ancient Church of Christ. They not only believe in the Bible, but they also believe in three other doctrines of faith: *The Book of Mormon*, *The Doctrine and Covenants*, and *The Pearl of Great Price* (History, 2017). They adhere to the principles of Christianity as well as additional revelations made by their founder, Joseph Smith. They believe Joseph Smith is the first of additional prophets that were sent from God after the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They do not believe in the trinity, and consider God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit three separate entities. To live in God's

presence after life on Earth, one must preside in the celestial kingdom, one of the three levels of heaven. The other two levels are the terrestrial and the telestial kingdom (History, 2017).

Members of the church “live by the spirit” and are driven spiritually by the prompting of the Holy Ghost (Mormon Beliefs, 2022). Those baptized are worthy enough to have constant companionship of the Holy Ghost and live by the promptings of the spirit. In addition, they value self-reliance and industry. The Utah state flag, the state with the highest population of LDS members, incorporates a honeybee to represent self-reliance and a beehive for industry. Mormons value industriousness, productivity, self-sufficiency, and hard work. To this end, they store a year’s worth of food and clothing in case of emergencies.

Research: Prominent Customs, Practices, and Behaviors

There are many notable customs and practices among member of the LDS church. They keep Sunday, the day of the sabbath, holy. Their intention is to serve God on this day and abstain from participating in activities outside of church or charity (LDS Living, 2017). They also abstain from consuming tobacco products, alcohol, coffee, and tea. According to an article by Purpose in Christ, Joseph Smith, a prophet and founder of the church, was given direction from God to promote a healthy diet. This excludes “hot drinks” (later to be clarified as coffee and tea) and tobacco from consumption (Harmer, 2021).

Interestingly, on average, Mormons have 3.4 children per household which varies from the national average of 2.1 (LDS Media Talks, 2021). According to LDS Media Talk, this is due in part to their focus on family and the belief that the family will be united in eternity. The article continues to explain that since LDS members believe they are eternal beings, they must become like God, and therefore these spirits must live with earthly parents who are their guides.

Another act of faith and devotion among the Mormon community is wearing temple garments. Other than military members on active duty, these garments are always white and are worn constantly (with the general exception of swimming, bathing, exercising, and marital relations). These garments are worn to promote modesty and are only worn by Mormons who have received their endowment in the Mormon Temple (Understanding Mormonism, 2016). The article continues to state that the garments symbolize covenants made with God, and the symbolism is considered sacred, therefore they choose not to discuss it outside of the religion. These garments are commonly worn by adult married members of the church as well as missionaries.

Serving a mission and becoming a missionary is a voluntary rite of passage in the Mormon religion. It is also considered one of the “callings” in the church. A calling gives members the joy of serving God by helping others. After attending the Missionary Training Center (MTC), men serve missions for two years and are referred to as Elders, and women, Sisters, serve missions for a year and a half. With a companion, their primary focus is to spread the good news of the gospel to anyone who will listen. The good news is that Christ’s gospel has been restored to Earth and part of this restoration is to receive modern revelation found in *The Book of Mormon* (Bruner, 2019). Missionaries follow strict rules that include a dress code, limited media exposure, travel, and daily schedule expectations. Few missionaries stay in the same assigned place throughout the duration of their mission and are often transferred to another location by their mission president. They spend most of their waking hours studying, proselytizing, and reflecting on the day’s events.

Research: Key Historical Events and Figures

According to a timeline written in *Mormon Beliefs*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints wasn't officially organized until April 6, 1830, but Joseph Smith, the founder, had his first vision in the spring of 1820 in New York (2022). At the time he was fourteen years old, struggled to decide which religion to join, and decided to pray on it. Smith claims that God and Jesus appeared to him and told him not to join any of the churches. Through Smith, God and Jesus would bring restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This article continues to explain that in 1823 an angel, Moroni, directed Smith to locate hidden gold plates on a hill called Cumorah. These plates contain a written record of the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Smith collected these plates, translated its contents, and in 1829 Moroni returned to retrieve these gold plates.

Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdry, who helped Smith translate the gold plates and was later to be named the first church historian, were conferred by John the Baptist the Aaronic Priesthood in 1829 and by 1830 received the Melchizedek Priesthood from Peter, James, and John. Information from the gold plates was used to create *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*, first published for the public in 1830, and a month later the church was officially organized in the home of Peter Whitmer with only six members. A few months later, Cowdry was sent to lead a small group on the church's first missionary trip to American Indians they called Lamanites, who were thought to be remnants of peoples in *The Book of Mormon*. They proselytized along the way and increased their church membership to 127 people.

Research: Patterns of Immigration

The church began in New York and began to move westward with the first mission trip led by Oliver Cowdry. By 1831 Joseph Smith felt the Lord directed him to gather in Ohio, and it was there that the first temple was built (Mormon Beliefs, 2022). Due to renunciation of the religion in Kirtland, Ohio, many members relocated to Missouri in 1838. Religious persecution

forced members to remain on the move and eventually settled in Illinois. This proved to be temporary, and after the death of Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, senior apostle, led a trek across Iowa and into the Rocky Mountains until they settled near the Great Salt Lake in Utah in 1847.

Research: Historical and Current Oppression

The persecution of LDS members began almost immediately following the formation of the church. Much of their early migration across the United States was due, in large part, to the violent mobs that threatened the lives of practicing Mormons. Missouri governor, Lilburn Boggs issued an “Extermination Order” in 1838 proclaiming that any Mormon that did not leave the state would be killed (Mormon Beliefs, 2022). Joseph Smith was falsely arrested, imprisoned, tarred and feathered, and eventually assassinated, along with his brother Hyrum, by a mob of oppressors in 1844. Brigham Young became Joseph Smith’s successor.

Oppression continued throughout the leadership of Brigham Young, especially after announcing the practice of plural marriage in 1852. This created additional controversy related to the Mormon religion. After many failed legal attempts to allow plural marriage within the rights of religious liberty, the “First Manifesto” was released in 1892, initiating the end of polygamy. However, to this day, many individuals outside of the church believe Mormons continue to practice polygamy. Late LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley officially denounced this practice in his General Conference address, “I wish to state categorically that this Church has nothing whatever to do with those practicing polygamy” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1998). He further expressed that it is not only against civil law but that over a century ago God declared to prophet Wilford Woodruff that the practice of plural marriage should be discontinued. He explained that “Mormon Fundamentalists” (who are typically viewed as the polygamists Mormons) are not associated with the LDS church in any way. Unfortunately, many

gentiles still associate the LDS religion with polygamy which is currently exploited in popular reality television shows like *Sister Wives*.

Events: Experience

To increase my understanding of the LDS religion, I attended a few different events. First, I attended the “farewell” for two young men that were about to leave for the MTC before serving their two-year missions. Both individuals prepared a speech sharing their testimony of faith, explaining that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is the one true church. Family and friends, both from within and beyond the ward boundaries, attended this traditional event. They explained their desire to spread the good news of Christ’s gospel as well as modern revelations found in *The Book of Mormon*.

In addition, I also attended sacrament. Shortly after I arrived, the leader of this church, Bishop Frasure, opened with a few words, but most of the service was driven by other speakers on the topic of charity. Multiple songs were sung, each followed by a prayer, and then more personal experiences were shared by church members.

The last event I attended was Relief Society. Relief Society is one of the largest women’s organizations in the world, and its purpose is to prepare women for the blessings of Eternal Life, to discuss life’s challenges through the church’s doctrines, ordinances, and covenants, and help those in need (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2021). The meeting was facilitated by a woman who was called to do so, while women participating in the group shared their own personal thoughts and experiences regarding the day’s topic.

Events: Emotional Impact

When entering the church, I was greeted with many warm welcomes draped with a silent hint of curiosity. Although I am not a member of the LDS church, many of my neighbors are,

and I could sense that they were wondering what brought me to their sanctuary. Rather than inundating me with questions and proselytizing, they simply welcomed me to their church and guided me to a seat. The day's message was charity. I easily connected with the message as well as the stories shared by select church members. A woman approached the podium and discussed a time when she felt compelled to visit an elderly friend, Miriam, in a care center. The woman stated she was at the store, had plans to get home quickly, make dinner, then get her children to an appointment on time. At the checkout counter she saw daffodils on display that reminded her of Miriam. Due to her time management, she desperately tried to ignore her compulsion to purchase the daffodils and visit Miriam. In the end, she purchased the daffodils, visited Miriam, read passages from *The Book of Mormon* to her, and her children were late to their appointment. Within a week, she received news that Miriam had passed away. Her story impacted me on a few different levels. First, it's apparent that sometimes what we think is important, like getting our children to an appointment on time, aren't important in the bigger scheme of things. I was also reminded of the importance of charity. We become closer to God by doing His work, helping others, loving thy neighbor, and building community and relationships.

I was also impacted by the missionaries' farewell. The men going on their missions seemed so young and naïve, but still eager to share their religion with strangers in foreign countries. They just graduated high school, never lived away from home, and are now embarking on a journey well beyond the comforts of home, for two full years. Missionaries do not get to choose their location, it is decided by church leaders and the Quorum of Twelve Apostles with prayer and revelation (Understanding Mormonism, 2016). Connecting on a personal level, I was an emotional wreck when my own son moved to college, a mere one and a half hours away from home. The conviction of these young missionaries, as well as their parents, amazes me.

Events: Key Elements Learned

I learned many facts through my research, but visiting the church, attending a farewell, and taking part in Relief Society exposed me to other aspects of the church. First, is the sense of community. Most traditional churches I have attended have a singular pastor that presents a sermon on a series or a specific topic. In the Mormon church, at least the sacrament I attended, multiple people spoke and shared their stories about charity. I was presented with a striking sense of community among their members. One member referenced a windstorm we had in our area in the fall of 2020. She explained the downed trees, fallen fences, broken branches, relocated patio furniture, and damaged roofs that most of the neighborhood experienced. She recalled how dozens of men in our community came to action with their chainsaws, work gloves, rakes, brooms, and hauling trucks ready to restore the neighborhood. The women, she recalled, offered men water and encouragement.

Although this recollection taught me about community within the church, it also taught me the gender roles that seem to be established within the church. I, too, was a part of the autumn 2020 windstorm clean-up. I wore the work gloves, hauled branches to trucks, and raked numerous leaves. While her story was a great example of community and charity, it also inadvertently showed the gender stereotypes within the church. Perhaps this was her own perspective, but the gender roles were also mentally noted when I attended Relief Society, strictly for women. I asked the lady sitting next to me where the children and men go. She stated the small children attend primary, older children attend a different group, and men attend another group, just for men. Lessons presented in Relief Society are not necessarily the same lessons taught in the men's group.

Another item I learned is the reason Mormons refer to themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I was speaking with a woman who referred to herself as Mormon. She then quickly corrected herself and stated that the church organization is aware that many nonmembers do not consider Mormons to be Christians. The woman explained that by calling themselves members of the Church of *Jesus Christ* of Latter-Day Saints, it would remind people that they believe in Jesus Christ and are Christians. The term Mormon has also been used as a nickname for the church, often with a negative connotation by those mocking the religion.

Events: Counseling Theories

In counseling, it is important to consider culture, race, religion, and other background information that may influence a client's worldview. According to McGoldrick et al., important information to gather when assessing a client's spiritual beliefs include understanding the primary beliefs that organize the family, the history of religious beliefs and practices, and the differences between the family's and community's beliefs (2005). These are valuable points to note when counseling individuals from the Mormon church.

Empirical evidence suggests a positive correlation between religion/spirituality and mental health (Kim et al., 2019). This study found how important it is for psychotherapy clients to have a healthy relationship with their God to accomplish positive psychological outcomes. Other techniques when counseling Christians could include Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy with a religious element included (RCBT). This counseling theory promotes healthier thinking and behavior by encouraging the client to apply their religious beliefs to alter their depressive feelings into a more optimistic view of the world (Blain, 2022). RCBT helps the client understanding his or her faith while strengthening his or her virtues.

Conclusion

Understanding one's religion is paramount when fully understanding the individual. By immersing myself in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, I have gained a deeper understanding of their religion and appreciate the profound role it plays in their worldview. Reflecting on their beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and historical events that have shaped their religion and culture, I am better equipped to build productive counseling relationships with the students I will serve in this great state of Utah.

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Cultural Background: Personal and Professional Impacts

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Abstract

Counselors are trained to support individuals with diverse backgrounds. To support others adequately, counselors need to be self-aware. Part of this self-awareness is identifying how their cultural backgrounds influence their lives. Culture plays a role in identity development, the family system, social justice advocacy, and an overall worldview. To effectively serve others in this helping profession, it is imperative that counselors seek to identify how their perspectives and behaviors are affected by their family history, religion, customs, and culture.

Keywords: culture, background, ethnicity

Cultural Background: Personal and Professional Impacts

Cultures are complex and offer insight into the behaviors, values, and worldview of individuals. As a future counselor, it is imperative I understand my own culture and how this influences my worldview. In addition, awareness of other cultures and how they impact the lives of others, specifically my students, is a valuable tool that offers insight into the attitudes, customs, and other various perspectives these individuals have that may be different from my own. Without this understanding, counselors run the risk of adopting cultural tunnel vision where they impose their own values on their client's by assuming they share the same beliefs (Corey et al. 2019). To better serve these individuals, counselors should understand their own backgrounds, how it plays a role in their worldview, and how it may be different from their clients' experiences.

My Cultural Background

About two years ago I took an Ancestry DNA test. Prior to the test I was told I had a rich history connected to the Cherokee people. I had seen pictures of relatives that appeared Native American and the Cherokee Nation, the largest of the three federally recognized Cherokee tribes, is located in Oklahoma, where my paternal grandfather lived before moving the family to California. Interestingly, upon receiving the results, there was no connection to any Native American culture, Cherokee or otherwise. According to the results, I am 46% England and Northwestern European and 49% Scottish Irish (AncestryDNA, 2022).

Many immigrants from England migrated to America and settled in Virginia, tripling the population, to find better opportunities. However, diseases and fights with Native Americans, who had already claimed the land, took many of the immigrants' lives (AncestryDNA, 2022).

Learning this impacted me. Having originally thought I was partially Native American, I assumed my ancestors were part of an inclusive group, but now I am uncertain.

I first became aware of my ethnicity when I was around four years old, and my best friend was biracial. At the time, my parents and her parents went to the same Kingdom Hall for Jehovah's Witnesses and were very close friends. My friend's mother was white, her father was black, and although I cannot remember her exact words, I remember her alluding to the fact that she felt ugly, based on her skin tone, and she wished she looked more like me. I recall feeling horrible that she felt that way, and it made me realize that we were different. Although it did not bother me that we were different, it certainly bothered her. I vaguely recollect telling her we were the same, but she just had darker skin. I now know it is not nearly as simplistic as that. When my parents stopped being Jehovah's Witnesses, we were excommunicated, my parent's church friends were not allowed to associate with us anymore, and my friend and I grew apart.

I grew up in a family where females are relatively passive. Women can share their opinions, but if they differ from their husband's, the husband gets the final say. This held true when it came to ending our participation as Jehovah's Witnesses. When I was older, my paternal grandmother, who was not a Jehovah's Witness, told me that she was worried my parents' relationship wouldn't last since my father was a devout Jehovah's Witness and my mother wasn't. My mother, being malleable, became a Jehovah's Witness as well. Later, my father began to disagree with some of the teachings, so he stopped going to the Kingdom Hall. This also created a stress on their relationship, so inevitably my mother stopped attending as well. This dynamic has influenced me in many ways. I see my mother in myself, as I often take a secondary position in my relationships but being a part of a "different" religion made me stand out as a child. I couldn't say the Pledge of Allegiance like every other student in my class, I

couldn't go trick-or-treating like all my friends, Christmas wasn't celebrated, and I didn't have a birthday until I was ten. I remember feeling like I was a burden for one of my teachers when I couldn't sing Christmas Carols with the rest of the class during music, so she threatened to send me to another classroom. This was devastating to me as I was an extremely shy child and hated to stand out among the crowd. Middle childhood is a time when formal schooling allows children to build social relationships and allows for a more thoughtful understanding of oneself and others (Wong et al., 2021). I was different and I knew it. This has helped me empathize with differences in other people, whether religiously or culturally.

I was born and raised in Riverside, California. According to the United States Census (2021), the two dominant races are 50% Hispanic or Latino and 34.1% White alone, not Hispanic or Latino. I was in the gifted and talented program at Jefferson Elementary School. Jefferson currently has 94% minority enrollment and 84% economically disadvantaged students (U.S. News, 2022). I then attended Ramona High School which has a minority enrollment of 89%, 86% economically disadvantaged students, and a dominant student population of 80% Hispanic and 11% White (U.S. News, 2022). In addition, I worked in the neighboring city of Moreno Valley for 11 years. I taught fourth and fifth grades at Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary School. This school has a minority enrollment rate of 96%, 86% are economically disadvantaged, and the student diversity includes 69% Hispanic/Latino, 17% Black or African American, and 4% White (U.S. News, 2022).

Being around diverse cultures has greatly impacted my life. I feel I have an appreciation for various customs, traditions, and beliefs. I moved to Utah nine years ago, and I often wonder if assimilating to a predominantly White culture has been more of an adjustment than growing up in a culturally diverse environment.

Origin Vs. Predominant Culture

I love many aspects of California, including its diversity, but I do not love the crime, traffic, or the high cost of living. In 2012 we made the decision to increase our quality of life and move to another state. At the time, my husband worked for a company based out of Texas, so we thought we were heading that direction, but he was eventually transferred to Utah. My first reaction was, “Utah?” I literally thought it was a joke. However, Utah is beautiful, access to nature and trails are readily available, the crime and cost of living is much lower, yet it is much less diverse than southern California. Back when my parents made the decision to stop being Jehovah’s Witnesses, I felt more normal, religiously speaking, but now that I live in an area that is 78% Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saint (Best Places, 2022), I feel like the religious minority again. I attend a non-denominational Christian church, wear a crucifix necklace, drink coffee, and I occasionally go to the store or mow the lawn on Sundays. These are all frowned upon in the LDS religion. My neighbors are extremely kind, but I often wonder if they wish an LDS family had moved into their ward instead. An LDS coworker mentioned she would only allow her daughter to date an LDS boy, which made me wonder if my own son would be ostracized at school, much like I felt in elementary school all those years ago.

Cultural Identity Development

Coming from a low-income family and having been an Alternative Religion Kid, I agree with Jessica Pratezina that I felt a “sense of otherness” that extended beyond school and that it brought “significant challenges and real possibilities to develop strengths” (2019). Although I truly felt like an outsider, I think it has given me the compassion and empathy for those that also feel like outsiders. This feeling supersedes religion and encompasses race, sexuality, physical and mental disabilities, etc. I simply have a heart to want others, all others, to feel they belong,

to feel their best, and be genuinely happy. I have been a teacher for twenty years, and I can honestly say that although many of our backgrounds are different, we all want to be appreciated, loved, heard, and seen.

I am Caucasian, and my race is part of the national majority, but I grew up in a racially diverse community and attended low socioeconomic schools where minority enrollment was the majority. It can be argued that based on my skin color I have been afforded systemic privileges that People of Color have not (Blevins & Todd, 2021), but I am thankful to have grown up and worked with a variety of cultures, ethnicities, sexual orientations, religions, and cognitive abilities.

Social Justice and Client Advocacy

Social justice can be defined as equitable treatment among groups, not discriminating against others, and an equal distribution of advantages and disadvantages for all people no matter the race, religion, culture, or sexual orientation (Hays & Erford, 2018). It can also be described as any action that addresses systemic oppression (Shriberg et al., 2021). My background has given me the experience and motivation to advocate for those less economically fortunate as well as those who feel like outsiders. Reflecting on the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, I have a growing self-awareness of my own beliefs, and I am aware of how my background leads to advantages in life as well as disadvantages in certain situations. I intend to continue to enrich my understanding of my own experiences and grow professionally to ensure that I understand my students'/clients' worldview and how their experiences impact them socially and emotionally.

Growing up in a diverse culture among economically disadvantaged individuals may help build relationships with students of similar backgrounds. I have already found myself in various

situations where I have advocated for students based on their religion, economic status, and cognitive abilities. Connecting with parents has been invaluable, as well as collaborating with peers and the community.

As mentioned, I was in the gifted and talented program throughout elementary school and have taught gifted and talented students for 19 years. I have often found this group to be neglected within the educational system and have advocated for them on numerous occasions. I have also taught students with disabilities, English language learners, general education students, and twice exceptional students. Among these groups, low-income and economically marginalized gifted students have been found to have less access to interventions than their economically advantaged peers (Proctor et al., 2019). Social justice insinuates resources should be equitable among all students regardless of race or financial status.

Conclusion

Understanding my background gives me the opportunity to understand how my upbringing may influence my world perspective. Counselors need to be in tune with their own worldviews, as well as others', to build foundational relationships with their clients while ensuring they are not neglecting their differences. Empathy goes beyond how a person is feeling due to a single experience, but encompasses understanding the entire individual, their background included. Recognizing power, privilege, and oppression within our society influences counselor self-awareness, understanding the client's worldview, and helps build a strong counseling relationship where counselors recognize situations when they need to advocate on behalf of their client to promote their well-being.

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Cultural Immersion Project: Interview Paper

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Abstract

Many factors play a key role in the development of one's worldview, and as a professional school counselor, it is imperative to recognize and understand how various backgrounds influence these worldviews. Race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and religion are some key factors that comprise an individual's background. While focusing on religion as one of the primary components of an individual's belief system, to fully understand members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, it proved beneficial to interview an individual within the community and a member of the organization. The following interviews allow for in depth understanding of their religion, as well as the impact this religion has made on these individuals personally, locally, and globally.

Keywords: culture, immersion, Latter-Day Saints, LDS, Mormon, interview

Cultural Immersion Project: Interview Paper

Professional counseling organizations and ethical codes continue to place considerable emphasis on applying cultural perspectives when working with multicultural populations (Corey et al., 2019). Actively acquiring knowledge on various factors that influence one's values and belief systems is paramount to fully understanding individuals' worldviews. Religion is a prime component of this belief system. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), also known as the Mormon religion, comprises 2.1% of the nation's population (LDS Living, 2021). To better understand this minority religion, interviews have been conducted with an organization member as well as an individual.

Organization Interview

Elder Rhodes is currently serving a mission in Ghana for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. His mission lasts two years and he represents the church 24 hours a day. When asked what the mission statement is for LDS missionaries, he recited the Missionary Purpose from his Missionary Preparation Teacher Manual, "We invite others to come unto Christ by helping them receive the restored gospel through faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, repentance, baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enduring to the end" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2014). The most important part, in his opinion, is "to invite others to come unto Christ." He's devoted to helping people find Christ because he knows He really does love them, and he's seen first-hand, the happiness He brings to others.

When asked what services are offered to the LDS population, Elder Rhodes almost didn't know where to begin. He explained how generous the church has been in the past and that presently, as noted at the last General Conference, they have donated over nine million dollars worldwide, both within and outside of the church. The church engages in sustainable ways to

help those in need, rather than merely offering handouts. In Ghana, for instance, the area he is serving speak a dialect called Twi. Many of these individuals have a difficult time finding a job or receiving a good education. The church offers a program called English Connect to help teach these individuals English, to increase their likelihood of finding employment or attaining an education. In addition, the church offers BYU Pathways, a church funded school, which is an excellent opportunity for less developed countries to access higher education. Elder Rhodes said the church believes the Savior told us to, “Be wise, gain in education, to be self-reliant.” Local services include the Bishop Storehouse that offers food and other necessities for families in need.

These services are known throughout the church since most members take part in raising the funds for these services. Within the church, it is recommended to give ten percent of your income to the church through tithing. These funds are used by the church in numerous ways: support missions, organizational programs, members in need, or to build meeting houses or temples throughout the world. Elder Rhodes continued to explain that they are taught to provide charity through Christ, for the true love of Christ. This suggests that members are aware of the services offered because many of them take part in supporting these services. In addition, most members of the church attend or watch General Conference. This meeting is held in Salt Lake City but is also televised. The leader of the church, the prophet, and the twelve apostles, among other authorities, give an audit and discuss all the church has done throughout the term.

The areas of greatest need depend on the location. In Ghana, education is the greatest need. As stated above, the church has created programs to help support this need. According to Elder Rhodes, religious persecution is not the biggest issue in Utah, but in other places throughout the country, and beyond, it is. Unfortunately, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is often considered a cult, and its members are called blasphemers. He also noted a

need that the LDS church may inadvertently put on non-members. Leaders of the church are trying to ensure inclusivity among non-LDS members. Often, especially in areas where there is a high percentage of LDS members, like Utah, non-LDS members feel isolated. It isn't Christlike to make anyone feel ostracized, and the church is focusing on reducing this phenomenon.

Religious persecution is the most significant challenge that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints faces. Historically, this population has endured its share of tribulations. Steps the church has taken to address religious persecution is to continue with righteousness. The Savior taught, as stated in the Bible Matt 5:44, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (New International Version, 1973/1984). Other than continuing with righteousness, Elder Rhodes also mentioned that the church strives to encourage others to worship according to their faith and to be accepting of everyone. To this end, the church regularly donates money to other houses of worship.

On a similar note, social justice is highly important to the church, but is also done in a way that is cohesive with the church's values. Every person is an equal, should have the right to worship their own way, and any discrimination is looked down upon by the church. Elder Rhodes paraphrased both the Bible and the Book of Mormon by synthesizing the view that whether you are black, white, male, or female, we are one. Christ died for everyone, no matter race, religion, culture, or gender. He ended with, "I know that to be true."

Individual Interview

Debbie, a woman in her mid-sixties, resides in Southern California and is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. She was more than willing to answer interview questions and seemed eager to share the many facets of her religion, including the story of her religious background. When she was younger, her family did not go to church very often. Every

now and then, through a friend, she would learn when a church bus would come to her neighborhood and would seize the opportunity to attend a Baptist church. By the time she was a young adult, she identified as Catholic and eventually married a man, Tom, who was also of the Catholic faith. After about twenty years of marriage and two children, tragically, Tom passed away in a plane crash. Understandably, Debbie was devastated, and it completely rocked the foundation of their family. Many individuals came to visit to offer their condolences and lend a helping hand, but it was members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints that remained steadfast. She recalls them bringing over meals and offering spiritual assistance through their missionaries. She welcomed the help and always invited them into her home. She recalled having many Mormon friends in high school and even reconnected with a friend, whose wife had recently passed away as well. It was at this point that Debbie really began to take the missionaries' lessons seriously. As she says, the rest is history. She has been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints for approximately twenty years, and is happily married to Kerry, the friend she reconnected with after the death of her first husband.

Debbie recalled her first experience feeling outside of the norm, religiously. After her first husband passed away, as stated previously, missionaries and other members of the church would come to her home to offer meals and provide the support she needed. Her best friend told her, "Watch out for those Mormons, they don't believe in Jesus." Though she was not a member of the church at the time, she remembers feeling as though they should be viewed through a cautious lens.

Another instance of covert discrimination involved her sister-in-law. They attended a formal dinner in Sacramento in the presence of government dignitaries. Debbie felt she looked nice and was eager to be a part of the red-carpet event. At some point her sister-in-law decided to

disclose to the table that, “Debbie is Mormon. That’s why she can’t wear a dress without sleeves and won’t drink at all tonight!” Debbie was mortified and humiliated by the turn of events. She stated she can be very vocal and opinionated but felt convicted to keep her mouth closed throughout the outburst.

Currently, the church is building a temple near where Debbie resides. It is church property and there is already a church building on the property. An example of overt discrimination are the protestors that are picketing to keep the temple from being built. These protestors have claimed that if construction may shake their homes, the steeple will be too high, but in the end, they have voiced that they are worried a temple will bring more Mormons to their beloved neighborhood. Debbie mentioned that she doubts they would be actively protesting if it was a Catholic church being built. In the meantime, the LDS church has had to use their own funds to hire security guards to ensure everyone’s safety.

Overall, Debbie says her faith plays a highly significant role in her life. Since she’s a convert, she feels it has been a big lifestyle change. For example, she can no longer drink coffee, tea, or alcohol. Due to the undergarments that she wears, she has even had to change how she dresses; no tank tops or shorts/skirts/dresses that reside too high above the knee. She stated, “It’s worth it to me to be a little inconvenienced. I couldn’t live without my faith. I wouldn’t be happy.”

After the interview, I had a few different emotional reactions. First, I felt empathetic towards the fact that she lost her husband in a plane crash. Her life’s story, as well as her children’s, would have been so different if there was not a malfunction with the airplane he was flying. On the other hand, as the Bible states in 1 Cor 10:13, “...And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a

way out so that you can endure it” (New International Version, 1973/1984). I believe she was tested, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints were there for her, spiritually. Through this, she was able to endure. In addition, she gained a new life partner in Kerry.

Through this interview, I gained a deeper perspective of the reality associated with being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Debbie mentioned that sometimes she will be doing something as mundane as watching a movie and randomly hear someone mock the Mormon religion through comedic humor. She also took the time to explain the undergarments she wears. These undergarments are two pieces. The bottom portion is akin to shorts and extends to just above the knee. The top portion covers her shoulders, is scoop-necked, and extends to her waist. She continued to explain that the garments are intended to be worn against the skin, therefore her bra is attached over her garments. The logistics regarding the garments are a concern. Two years ago she had a heart attack, and the nurses were flummoxed when they attempted to put the electrodes on her chest to monitor her heart activity. Imagine opening a shirt, seeing a bra, and under the bra additional garments. In this high stress moment, she remembers feeling different. Perhaps if the nurses were more educated in various religions, they would not have looked at her in the same manner. I have internalized this event because, as a counselor, I never want my students to feel different based on their religion, or various other extraneous factors.

Gracism

When relating my immersion experience to David Anderson’s book *Gracism: The Art of Inclusion* (2007), I cannot help but reference 1 Cor 12:12, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all of its parts are many, they form one body.” Anderson

mentioned this in his chapter called “The Art of Inclusion.” Anderson then directed us to read the remaining verses through the lens of race, culture, and class. Through this lens, Paul was suggesting that no one person should be excluded from the whole, and that we all matter. A racist appreciates diversity. This brings forth what Elder Rhodes said about social justice within his church. He referenced that Jesus died on the cross for all our sins. God views us as equals, and we are all his children. As Anderson stated, “No one should be on the fringes without others reaching out to include them.” I value this sentiment and from what I’ve gathered from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, they do as well.

Summary

This immersion project has allowed me to engage physically with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints by attending various activities and engaging in interviews. In addition, I have researched the religion and attained information that I wouldn’t have otherwise gleaned. Through these three formats, events, interviews, and research, I gained invaluable knowledge regarding this population. Through research, I gathered facts about the religion. I wanted to ensure the resources I utilized were reputable, therefore most sources were published by entities within the church. Although I learned a great deal of information, I feel there is more to be learned that may not be freely advertised by the church. The interviews were enlightening because I gathered real-world perspectives from both the individual and the organization’s representative. That being said, the individual interview shared a personal perspective, and the organization interviewed tended to focus on the whole church with a biblical worldview. Attending church services and two missionaries’ farewell allowed me to gain a deeper community perspective within the church.

The most surprising takeaway from the interviews was their willingness to openly share what they could about their religion. The two individuals believe their religion whole-heartedly and live the gospel. The individual that I interviewed was surprisingly willing to share detailed information regarding her garments and the struggles she faced after her first husband's death. Hearing the religious persecution that both of the interviewees face, hurts my heart. I can tell these individuals are kind, gentle souls, that live to serve others, even those that choose to persecute them.

I have changed because of this immersion experience. Utah has been my home for the last nine years. Upon making the decision to move here, I knew I would be surrounded by a culture different from my own. My fear was that I would be ostracized if anyone discovered that I wasn't part of their faith. At work, I avoided wearing shoulder baring shirts in order not to "out" myself as not a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I was fearful that I might be treated differently, looked down upon, or potentially dismissed because I did not fit in with the majority. Though there are some individuals that may not include me as frequently as their religious sister, overall, I have learned through this experience how accepting this faith is. They understand religious persecution, their ancestors lived it, many of them have lived it, and I value their view that we are one.

When working with different populations, the insights I have gained immersing myself in this population is invaluable. For the past nine years I have taught at an elementary school in Utah. Beginning next school year, I will be the school counselor at two elementary schools, also in Utah. Having a better understanding of the predominant religion in this state offers me insight into the majority of these students' worldview. Through my research, experience, and interviews,

I feel I am more enabled to connect with these students, not to mention their parents, and the teachers and administrators I work with.

Conclusion

Understanding one's religion is paramount when fully understanding the whole individual. By immersing myself in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, I have gained a deeper understanding of their religion and appreciate the profound role it plays in their worldview. Reflecting on their beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and historical events that have shaped their religion and culture, I am more equipped to build productive counseling relationships with the students I serve in Utah.

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