



Church won't give up on 'lost members'

On LDS rolls: Volunteers spend time tracking down those who are 'in transit,' hoping to bring them back



By Matt Canham
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Her father immersed her in LDS Church baptismal waters at the standard age of 8.

Within three years, Tamara's family stopped attending The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, feeling unwelcome in their new congregation.

And in 1994 at the age of 23, she married a man who was never baptized a Mormon. She drifted away to a new home, with a new last name, in a new neighborhood where no one realized that her name remains on the membership rolls.

Tamara joined the ranks of Utah's lost Mormons - a sizable group.



One-tenth of Utah Mormons have their membership records in the LDS Church's "address unknown file," a clearinghouse for those who have stopped attending one ward - a basic congregation - but have not shown up at another. The church keeps such a file for every state and country where members live, identifying the lost by their last known address.

All together, Utah's lost Mormons equal the population of Salt Lake City, about 180,000.

In an interview with *The Salt Lake Tribune*, LDS Church general authority Merrill Bateman provided unprecedented detail about the LDS Church's address unknown file and the desire to locate the people he refers to as "in-transit Mormons."

"We really don't give up on people," said Bateman, a member of the Quorum of the Seventy, one of the LDS Church's governing bodies. "As long as they have not asked to have their names taken off the rolls of the church, we have a responsibility toward them and believe in time . . . we will be an influence to help them find their way back."

But not everyone wants to come back. Tamara, who now lives in Riverton, sure doesn't.

"I just wish you can be left alone to believe what you want to believe," she said.

The Less Active: The LDS Church provides county-by-county membership numbers to the Utah Governor's Office each year to help make population projections. In a July series, *The Tribune* used those numbers to show the share of Utahns who are Mormon has declined annually for the past 15 years, changing the social and cultural make-up of the state one neighborhood at a time.

Bateman didn't disagree with the assessment, but did challenge the numbers used in *The Tribune* series. The membership numbers provided to the state only include people with known addresses.

"They represent all of the members whose records are in ward and branch units in the state," he said. "They are not to be absolute numbers in those areas."

Bateman said the count provided to the state doesn't include the 180,000 in-transit Mormons the church assigns to Utah's official LDS population. The official number is in the *Church Almanac*, published each year. The in-transit figure is derived by

subtracting the count provided to the state from the official number.

Those lost Mormons come from a variety of circumstances. Some are in college or the military, others have moved recently for a job, many have drifted from the LDS Church or joined another faith. At least a few are dead.

"It's not just people who want to get away from the church," said Bateman, who did agree that many on the address unknown list are "less active." "Those are the people who don't make frequent contact with the church."

Inactive Mormons who rarely, if ever, attend church are included in all membership numbers. Brigham Young University professor Tim Heaton, who studies LDS demographics, estimates that between between half and one-third of those Mormons known to live in a ward do not attend church regularly. Most of those who attend regularly never fall into the address unknown file.

Usually, persons of families that move will request their membership records to be transferred to their new ward, or their bishop will do so on his own. This used to take days if not weeks, until the LDS Church started transferring members' records electronically in early 2004.

The transfers now take "nanoseconds," according to George Fisher, a former bishop in the Parrish Heights Ward in Centerville.

"If we have a new family move into the ward, we get a date of birth and a full name and punch it in," he said.

He estimated that at any one time somewhere between 5 percent and 10 percent of the 450 members of the ward "were in-transit."

"We didn't know who they were or where they were," he said. "If we couldn't find them, [their records] could be sent off to church headquarters."

Thousands are each year. About 50,000 names are added to Utah's in-transit list every year and about 90 percent of those new additions are found within the next 12 months, Bateman said.

Efforts to find the rest continue until the church receives a death notice or until the member would have reached the age of 110.

That means some of the people included in the worldwide tally of 12 million members are really dead, with life expectancy in the United States at about 78 years old, according to Mormon researcher David Stewart, who is planning a book on missionary efforts and LDS Church demographics.

Bateman said the in-transit high age of 110 is just to give membership department employees an upper end to the statistic, though he acknowledged that "it might be a little high."

Even after death, the church doesn't give up.

"We will get them on the other side of the veil anyway," Bateman said.

LDS leaders say scripture requires that they maintain membership records and search for those who they have lost.

They point to a section of the Book of Mormon that states "their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God."

To do so, the LDS Church has set up three "member locator" offices in Salt Lake City, American Fork and St. George that search for lost Mormons in the United States and Canada. Analysts search for the names and numbers of relatives through church records or online public access databases, Bateman said.

Those leads are then passed on to volunteer missionaries, mostly elderly couples, who serve as member locaters.

Tracking Lost Souls: Tracking Lost Souls: Beverley Price spends four hours each Thursday morning at the Relief Society headquarters in downtown Salt Lake City trying to locate in-transit Mormons.

She first volunteered with her husband six years ago, and after his death, she has kept up the mission that has brought her such enjoyment. She likes calling such different people from throughout the country.

"We get some who are so glad to have us call and then we get some who are not so nice, too," she said. "We get some who are so suspicious. They ask 'Why are you calling? Where did you get this number?' Some don't want to be found."

She located three lost souls on Oct. 6, though she said some of the other 10 volunteers have found as many as 10 in one shift. They identify themselves as member locaters when they call and they are told they are not allowed to preach.

"That is strictly against the rules," Price said.

Stella Prater, a Hurricane resident who volunteered as a member locator throughout 2003, said many of the people they call are college age and they move often. Family members usually help, but there are instances when all leads run dry.

"Sometimes it is just an impossibility to find them," Prater said. "But when you do find someone, how grateful you are that the Lord is helping you."

Both Prater and Price hope that more Mormons will join the ranks of the member locaters.

"We could use more volunteers," said Price. "We are rather small."

On Oct. 6, the LDS Church requested more member locaters in its part-time church service memorandum, asking for those willing to spend at least six weeks to six months working the phones.

Tamara didn't know the church was searching for her for the past 11 years and she hopes the member locaters never find her.

"Obviously if I wanted to be in the church, I know where it is," she said.

She keeps her former LDS affiliation private and plans to request her name taken off of the membership rolls at some point. She already would have if not for her active LDS family members.

"It's a sensitive issue," she said.

Bateman understands that some in-transit Mormons have moved on for good, but it is the idea of those who may return to the faith that keep church leaders focused on locating lost members.

He recalls a speech last year by Thomas Monson, a member of the LDS Church's First Presidency. A woman in Monson's ward many years ago walked the Salt Lake area neighborhoods searching for people to sign up for a church magazine. She found Charles and William Ringwood in a small house on a mostly industrial block. Charles, then 94, had been in the address unknown file for 16 years. Her contact sparked renewed interest and Charles Ringwood remained active until he died just a few months later.

"We are very interested in finding those in the in-transit file," Bateman said, "locating them and rekindling their connection."

mcanham@sltrib.com

How member locaters operate

The LDS Church staffs "locator" offices in Salt Lake City, American Fork and St. George.

Analysts use church records, phone books and online public databases to find phone numbers for lost members or their relatives.

Volunteers, mostly elderly members, spend four hours a day once a week using those numbers to try to contact members the LDS Church does not have an address for.



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