

ANALYSIS

We sent out 80,000 postcards to Latter-day Saints in the U.S. Here's what we learned

Our representative survey found high percentages of self-identified members agreeing with church teachings on historical questions and sexuality

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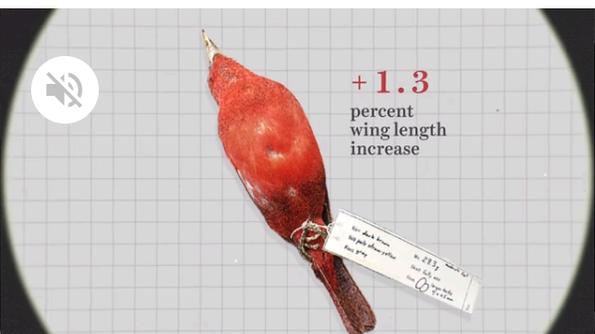
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Davis Ebohon poses for a photo with his son Ikponmwosa Ebohon before the Saturday morning session of the 193rd Semiannual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Conference Center in Salt Lake City on Saturday, Sept. 30, 2023. | Megan Nielsen, Deseret News



By Josh Coates, Stephen Cranney

The 21st century is in many ways already unrecognizable to the 20th century — especially in terms of marked evolutions in religious beliefs and practices in America. Understanding how and why these changes are taking place is often at the mercy of the headlines we see, the media we consume and our intuition. Helpful data can also help us make sense of what is taking place.

With respect to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there have been countless internet-based surveys that are typically posted on forums or email lists (often called convenience and snowball surveys). Even though some of these cover very large swaths of Latter-day Saints, these types of surveys lack the statistical validity to say much that is meaningful about Latter-day Saints.

By comparison, two relatively large, representative sources of data on Latter-day Saints occurred in 2011 and 2016. The 2011 Pew survey came in response to heightened political interest in Mitt Romney when he ran for the presidency a second time in 2012. This survey of 1,019 Latter-day Saints was conducted over the phone, with members asked about their own religious beliefs and practices, their political beliefs and how they felt members of the Church of Jesus Christ were perceived in society.

A few years later, Jana Riess and Benjamin Knoll polled 1,156 Latter-day Saints via a representative internet panel, along with some phone surveys. Why some animals are shrinking ×
included 540 former Latter-day Saints. This survey explored differences between millennials and previous generations.

In 2022, we at the B.H. Roberts Foundation made plans for a representative survey of current and former Latter-day

information on basic demographics, beliefs and practices, but to see if we could detect and quantify philosophical differences between these two groups.

We had an interest in understanding if there were meaningful variations within the Latter-day Saint faith community as well. While there is a lot of information out there about Latter-day Saints and politics, we also wanted to explore more directly the religious beliefs that were more specific to Latter-day Saints.

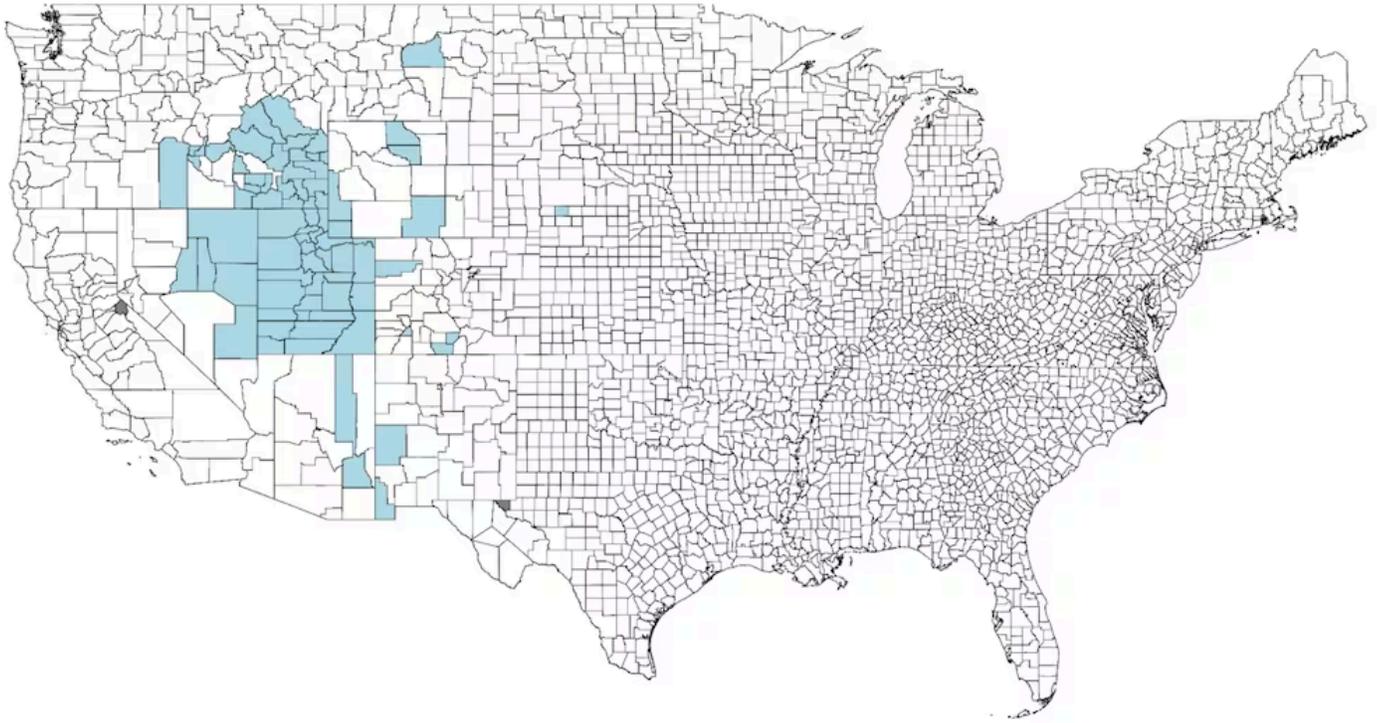
When making a statement about what members of the church *actually believe*, it's natural for people to assume their own beliefs are representative of the whole. Yet rather than speculate about what members think about Book of Mormon historicity or the 19th-century practice of polygamy, a far more accurate picture is made possible by a statistically rigorous, representative survey.

We decided to focus our research on what has been historically known as the “Mormon Corridor” — the areas of western North America that were settled between 1850 and 1890 by members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Despite encompassing just 37% of America's Latter-day Saints (according to the 2020 U.S. Religion Census), this area represents a major cultural hub of the faith.

So, in 2023 we sent out nearly 80,000 postcards to a random distribution of households within counties that had populations that were at least 15% Latter-day Saint based on the 2020 U.S. Religious Census estimates. In addition to the mailers, recent research has shown that Facebook advertisements, after proper weighting, can be utilized in survey work, so we ran a Meta campaign that solicited survey respondents from Facebook and Instagram both inside and outside this geographical region.

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Counties shown in blue have a population of at least 15% Latter-day Saints. | 2020 U.S. Religious Census

This method allowed us to obtain 3,865 valid responses to our survey, roughly half from the mailers and half from Facebook. When surveys came in from word of mouth, they were removed to maintain representativeness. You can read more about the [methodology here](#).

In total, we surveyed 2,625 members and 1,183 former members. About 71% of respondents that identified as Latter-day Saints in this geographical area state that they attend church weekly, while 65% of those outside the area state that they attend weekly. These rates are very similar to the 69% of Latter-day Saints who attend church weekly, per the 2022 Cooperative Election Study.

This relatively high rate of reported religious activity doesn't necessarily mean that 7 out of 10 members of record are regularly attending church, because there are those that are members of record that no longer identify as Why some animals are shrinking × reflect a relatively high activity level for those that do

Our data uncovered fine-grained detail about a wide range of beliefs. We found that about 90% of self-identified members believe in "a true record of ancient people who actually existed"

“Joseph Smith literally saw God the Father and Jesus Christ.” Only 1 in 10 members agreed on some level that the church should solemnize same-sex marriages in the temple.

We also asked respondents a number of questions about their own marriages. We found that the divorce rate for temple marriages is about three times lower than the national divorce rate.

In order to investigate possible philosophical differences between current and former Latter-day Saints, we chose to use a set of standardized Moral Foundations Theory questions developed by social psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph. Moral Foundations Theory is one of the preeminent theories in moral psychology and measures the fundamental moral drives that shape people's moral, political and social outlooks. This theoretical framework had never been applied to current or former Latter-day Saints until now.

In addition to basic demographics and Moral Foundations Theory, we asked respondents about their beliefs related to a host of other topics. We were interested to find two very different ways respondents answered these questions — which we will explore in future articles in coming weeks.

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