

Mormon Lessons for the Unification Church

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The rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon Church) is an incredible story of a persecuted Christian offshoot that has grown to become the most successful, new global religion in the 14 centuries since Islam. It boasts 4.5 million active members worldwide (15 million recorded), and the church itself is estimated to be worth \$40 billion. Its membership has included a 2012 U.S. presidential candidate.

All this membership, wealth, and a permanent footing in mainstream consciousness was achieved within a 185 years of its founding. This is a monumental achievement. Rodney Stark, a highly regarded sociologist of religion, declared this ascent to be “one of the great events in the history of religion.”

In contrast, the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity (Unification Church) is a new faith experiencing difficulties in all these areas. Currently, the church finds itself in much turmoil in areas such as finances, leadership and growth. If the Unification Church is to survive and grow, changes need to be implemented.

It is fortunate for the Unification Church that the Latter-day Saints have proved it possible for a new religion to find success globally, bucking declining trends experienced by other Christian sects. Many studies of the Church of the Latter-day Saints have attempted to explain its enviable growth. Let's consider ways the Unification Church might attempt to replicate its success.

To begin with, the development of the two faiths are strikingly similar. A charismatic leader raised in the Christian faith started a new religion upon experiencing a supernatural vision. After initial growth and success, both their fledgling churches experienced severe persecution from their communities, and the founders were jailed several times during their ministries. And now, the factionalism that Unification Church is experiencing soon after the death of its founder is eerily similar to the “Succession Crisis” experienced by the Mormons following the assassination of its founder.



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In addition to parallels of historical background, the two traditions have organizational similarities as they exist today. Both have centers of power politically and geographically. Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon oversees the worldwide movement from South Korea; President Thomas Monson presides over the spiritual and administrative direction of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) from Salt Lake City, Utah. They both direct a sprawling hierarchy of leadership and act in a prophet-like capacity, rendering decisions based on revelation and inspired interpretations.

Evangelism is central to both faiths. LDS promotes “the mission” as a major faith practice with young men and women typically spending a year and a half to two years devoted to evangelizing ten hours a day. The Unification Church has also promoted youth mission, the difference being that fundraising and service-learning are major complements to the evangelism. Additionally, both churches have had strong histories of overseas missionary work with robust international networks.

In terms of sacred texts, both faiths draw heavily on the Bible, as expected, but each has primary sacred texts revealed to the founders which expand on biblical understanding, outline a compelling narrative, and posit a new theology.

The most compelling similarity between the two religions is their shared veneration of the family. Both consider the family to be the core of salvation. Although Mormonism promoted polygamy at an early stage, mainline Mormons abandoned that practice more than a century ago, and are at the forefront of promoting family values in the public sphere, as is the Unification Movement.

For all these affinities, there are differences between the two. The most obvious are the cultural traits inherited from their respective countries of origin. Mormonism is indigenous to America, with features

that resonate to it, i.e., patriotism, entrepreneurship, capitalism. These contribute to the fact that roughly 75% of Mormons in the world live in the Western hemisphere.

On the other hand, the Unification Church is couched in Korean tradition. Its group life is steeped in Confucian models of social interaction and some of its religious practices derive from indigenous Korean shamanism. Confucian influences on Unificationism allow for easier adoption in East Asian countries, but it may be too rigidly hierarchical for Westerners. Shamanistic attributes and ancestral devotion are likewise off-putting for much of mainstream Christianity.

Another major difference is the Latter-day Saints' success in business in comparison to the financially-strapped and politically fraught corporations supporting the Unification Church. A 2012 Bloomberg Business article reported that the LDS Church is "likely worth \$40 billion today and collects up to \$8 billion in tithing each year." The multitude of successful Mormon-owned corporations such as Bain Capital, JetBlue, and Marriott International speak to superior leadership and business capabilities of its general membership.

In contrast, the Unification Church is in want of good leadership and success in business. Many outside observers view the Unification Church, like the LDS, as a church in "the business of business," with abundant land, capital and assets. In truth, many Unification Church holdings are depreciated, divested, or in debt. Recent public data is sparse, but in 2004 the movement's major business conglomerate, Tongil Group, was \$3.6 billion in debt. Scandals and factions within leadership, have incurred financial hardship and litigation.

A last contrasting point are the respective sacred texts. The *Book of Mormon* is composed of books, much like the New and Old Testaments, and written in narrative form. Stark notes, "there is nothing obscure or unclear in its doctrine... The revelation of the *Book of Mormon* is not a glimpse of higher and incomprehensible truths but reveals God's words to men with a democratic comprehensibility."

The *Divine Principle*, on the other hand, is written as an exposition of the Bible and Christian faith. Many of the ideas within are explanations of abstract theological concepts in philosophical, historical and political terms. There is a strong attempt to intellectualize, systematize, and rationalize faith in the Unificationist tradition, possibly an influence of the modernist mode at the time of its writing.

Having reviewed comparable elements, it is possible to recommend some strategies derived from the LDS Church that may benefit the Unification Church. This is not meant to be a comprehensive, prescriptive assessment, but a proposed list of distilled suggestions that may lend themselves to success for the church.

The first would be a commitment to leadership training, especially of youth. Strong leadership allowed Mormonism to thrive following the assassination of its founder and splintering of the movement into various sects. A culture of promoting leadership skills allows members to be entrepreneurial, wealthy, and influential in their communities. Mormons actively promote this through their Mission program and their inculcation of a business culture.

The Unification Church has its own youth leadership programs as mentioned before, but the Mormon Mission is much more developed and systematized, and goes hand-in-hand with evangelical efforts due to a primary focus on proselytizing. The Unification Church must continue its tradition of comparable programs and keep investing in them.

The pro-business attitude of the Mormons also translates into better leaders. *The Economist* cites the Marriott School at Brigham Young University as offering the best value for business schools in the country if you are Mormon — only \$10,000 a year. Young, disciplined, entrepreneurial men and women are obviously a great asset to any organization. This permeates the Mormon culture and influences its membership to be efficient and effective. The Unification Church certainly has its hands in many businesses. It's about time members translate those business sensibilities into local churches and personal leadership potential.

Secondly, it is high time for the Unification Church to revisit its theology and scripture. The Mormon text and theology has a distinct advantage of being based on narrative, which is timeless and open to interpretation by each new generation, applied pragmatically. Its plainness of language makes it quite approachable for lay people; in fact, local LDS communities are led by unpaid volunteers seldom with any formal theological training.



Young Mormon women with their assigned missions

In contrast, the primary text of the Unification Church, the *Divine Principle*, reads for some like a 1950s manual with a mixture of outdated scientific “proofs,” numerological “proofs,” fringe Christian beliefs, and anti-communist polemics. It feels dated. The theological components are so wrought with philosophical, historical, and scientific attempts at validation that it may intimidate or put off those who perceive it to be elitist or overly intellectual. The Unification Church ought to make its beliefs clearer and be committed to further development in response to the times. Otherwise, it will continue along a path on which even members, especially the youth, will find it difficult to put faith or reason in its core beliefs.

The final suggestion is to bolster the message of family values. The concepts of “One Family Under God”; of God as a parent; of some form of household salvation (as opposed to individual salvation); the error of celibacy; of eternal marriage; of having large, healthy families (“be fruitful and multiply”); these are concepts that will attract people.

Having a pro-family stance also makes very clear what members’ stances ought to be on key public issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage. The Unification Church has been doing generally well on this front, but more ought to be done. Stephen Covey, the Mormon author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and *Principle-Centered Leadership*, makes very clear his high estimation of family and marriage, and devotes entire chapters to them in his books. Promoting values in such a way, publicly and in practice, helps bolster the positive perception of Mormon family values, and this is something Unificationists ought to do as well.

The Unification Church can take away from the Mormon experience the necessity of leadership development, the continuation and bolstering of its pro-family message, and the critical evaluation and systematization of its theology based on the times. These suggestions, if implemented, could aid the future development of the Unification Church.

This, however, begs the question of whether Unificationism is meant to exist as a church. If Unificationists decide that they want to become a religion, and the tradition is nearing a point where the survival of the church is at risk, the Mormon model is surely the best to emulate and learn by.

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Photo at top: Mormon missionaries in Washington, DC.