

History



THE FIRST VISION One of the most influential events in religious history occurred during the spring of 1820, when two heavenly beings appeared to a young boy named Joseph Smith.

Joseph lived in New York in 1820, when a religious revival was sweeping the region. Confused by the conflicting claims of the various faiths, he went to the Bible for guidance and there found the counsel to “ask of God” (James 1:5).

In a wooded grove near the family farm, Joseph knelt to pray for guidance. In answer to his prayer, God, the Eternal Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to Joseph and told him to join none of the existing churches. Further, he was instructed that through him, God would restore to earth the Church originally organized by Jesus Christ, with all its truths and priesthood authority. Joseph Smith officially organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York.

THE BOOK OF MORMON: ANOTHER TESTAMENT OF JESUS CHRIST In September of 1823, a resurrected being named Moroni appeared to Joseph and showed him a religious history of an ancient American civilization engraved on metal plates and buried in the

ground. Joseph translated this record into English by the gift and power of God. Named for one of the ancient prophets who compiled it, the Book of Mormon was first published in 1830. Today it is available in more than 110 languages.

The Book of Mormon contains religious writings of civilizations in ancient America between about 2200 BC and AD 420. It includes an eyewitness account of the ministry of Jesus Christ on the American continent following His Resurrection in Jerusalem.

RESTORATION OF PRIESTHOOD AUTHORITY Apostles and prophets in all ages have had authority from God, called priesthood, to act in His name. The original Twelve Apostles received the priesthood under the hands of the Savior Himself, but with their persecution and passing, that priesthood authority disappeared from the earth. An essential component of the Restoration, therefore, was the reestablishment of this authority. This was accomplished in 1829 when John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John—all resurrected beings—appeared and, placing their hands on the heads of Joseph and his associate Oliver Cowdery, restored this authority to the earth.

GROWTH AND OPPOSITION Like the ancient Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a missionary church. In the mid-19th century, converts were encouraged to gather with the Saints in America, but these growing groups of immigrants from Europe and the Eastern United States provided fuel for contention.

To escape this escalating turmoil, the Church moved from New York to Ohio, then to Missouri, and later to Illinois. In 1839 the Latter-day Saints established the community of Nauvoo, Illinois. But mounting suspicion and anxiety within neighboring communities fed an atmosphere of extreme agitation and distrust. Some began to call for the Latter-day Saints’ extermination.

At the height of this turmoil, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were shot to death by an armed mob in nearby Carthage, Illinois.

BRIGHAM YOUNG AND THE WESTWARD TREK Mobs attacked Latter-day Saint settlements in the region, burning crops, destroying homes, and threatening to exterminate the people. Church leaders knew another relocation would be necessary. This led to one of the most visionary and significant migrations in American history.

Brigham Young succeeded Joseph Smith as the leader of the Church. In 1846 he led the Latter-day Saints across the frozen Mississippi River into unsettled Iowa territory and eventually on to the remote valley of the Great Salt Lake, 1,000 miles to the west, arriving in July 1847.

During the next 22 years, an estimated 68,000 Latter-day Saints from around the globe flowed into this Great Basin refuge. Most crossed the plains in wagons, but nearly 3,000 walked pulling handcarts.

From the Salt Lake Valley, Brigham Young directed the establishment of more than 350 communities in western America.

INTO THE MODERN ERA When Utah gained statehood on January 4, 1896, Church membership totaled a quarter of a million, mostly in Utah. When Church membership reached a million in 1947—100 years after the desperate exodus from Nauvoo—it was still largely a North American organization. After 1947, however, worldwide growth accelerated.

At the end of 2020, the worldwide membership of the Church stood at 16.5 million, in 196 nations and territories, with only 40 percent living in the United States.

