

Fieldwork Report on a visit to a ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For the purpose of this fieldwork report, on the 12th November 2017 I attended a Sunday morning service at Leeds 1st ward, part of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints faith, in Hawksworth, Leeds. The aim of this visit was to spend a short period of time with this religious group, observing and gaining an increased understanding of the position and diversity of religion in Britain. During my visit I was informed that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, known also as the LDS church, was formed in North America early in the 19th century and as such many consider it to be a new religious movement (NRM), this alongside other information I gathered during the visit and my own independent research into this religious group will be discussed here, as I examine how the LDS church is positioned within society in Britain.

Having been raised a Baptist Christian I had little prior knowledge of the LDS church and therefore spent time prior to the visit doing some background reading, familiarising myself with the key features of the church. One source I found incredibly useful was the UK and Ireland Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (2017) website. It provides a vast amount of information for example, a history of the church, recent news within the church and resources for use during meetings and teaching sessions, this information allowed me to broaden my knowledge of the church before attending. It was particularly interesting to compare the LDS website UK statistics with statistics on the UK Baptist Union website. National membership of the LDS church is 185,848 and for Baptist churches 122,752 (Baptists Together, 2016). This enabled me to begin to understand the positioning of the LDS church within this country as well as the national presence the LDS community has. Comparing the LDS church membership with the number of LDS congregations in the country (333) shows us that there is an average of 558 people per LDS congregation.

For my visit, I located the closest ward to myself by inputting my postcode to the UK LDS church website, this provided me with information about Leeds 1st ward, such as the address, main phone number, phone numbers for the missionaries attached to the church

and the name of the leading Bishop. I arranged the visit by calling a missionary who provided me with the email address for the Bishop from whom I sought permission to attend. I decided to approach the visit using the participant observation research method to collect qualitative data, a method involving direct contact with participants, in this case members of an LDS church. As May (2011, p.164) states “knowledge comes from experience”, observations made during a visit enable a researcher to understand a community.

During this visit, I intended to observe and interact with church members as well as note-take throughout the service to ensure I would not forget anything important as it was 3 hours in length. Immediately after leaving the service I expanded my notes in more detail, as recommended by May (2011, p.177), as it ensures as much information as possible is recalled. Using this method allowed me to enter the experience with an open-mind as I consider all aspects of the experience, rather than just looking for what could support any pre-supposed theories created beforehand. Of course, there is still a risk of possible bias as there is a reliance on the researcher’s personal interpretation of the data and experience. I was aware throughout the visit of ensuring it remained overt to avoid any ethical issues. So, whilst there is the possible limitation of data being affected due to church members adapting their behaviour around me once they knew why I was there (May, 2011), I did explain to each person I spoke to clearly who I was and my purpose for being there.

The service took place in a LDS church meetinghouse in a residential estate in Leeds. The first thing I noticed about the church was a tall structure adjacent to the front of the building. Once in the meetinghouse, I asked several people what this structure was and the significance of it, however most did not know until one member of the church explained that by pointing towards the sky it signals being closer to God. Having done more reading around the physical meetinghouses since my visit, I have noticed many LDS churches either have a steeple or a steeple structure next to the building such as the meetinghouse I visited.

Bradley (1992), in an article discussing the changes in steeple form on church buildings describes how early Mormon steeples were put in place as a reminder of how all people are

yearning to reach the heavens. Bradley goes on to discuss a loss to the LDS church in how the steeples have over time lost their symbolic significance. This is perhaps demonstrated in how several people I asked at the Hawksworth LDS church simply did not know the significance or name of the steeple outside their own meetinghouse.

The meetinghouse was a large building and I was greeted immediately upon entering by two young female missionaries, they led us into the chapel where the first of the three sessions across the morning, the sacrament meeting, took place. The hour long sacrament meeting included hymns and three short talks from church members which, as it was Remembrance Sunday, focused on a remembrance both of human soldiers and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. The chapel was a large room with pews for the congregation members facing a main platform where the church leaders and those who would be speaking during the meeting sat. The chapel was noticeably different from the rest of the building, it was a brightly light, white room decorated with only flowers which surprised me initially as many other religious buildings I have been to in the past have been decorated with symbolic artwork. However, I later discovered a handbook on the LDS UK website presenting guidelines for the use and location of property inside the building. One section of the handbook specifies that whilst church-approved artwork may be displayed inside most of the meetinghouse, only flowers are allowed to decorate the chapel (LDS.org UK, 2017). This handbook places a great emphasis on how meetinghouses should be treated with respect and the chapel with particular reverence as they are most importantly places of worship.

After the sacrament meeting, the congregation separated into small groups, the adults attending different teaching sessions specific to the stage of faith of each individual. I attended a group for those new to the religion and just discovering it, and, with an interactive approach this was an opportunity for those in attendance to ask any questions they had. The group session was held in a small well-kept room, however it was noticeably different from the chapel in that there were open brick and unpainted walls and multiple whiteboards for

teaching use on the walls, again emphasising the sacred nature of the chapel through its difference.

The final hour of the morning involved two meetings, one for men and one for women. I attended the meeting called Relief Society, for woman aged 18 or over in the church. As set out in the LDS handbook this meeting aims to strengthen and teach individuals and families (LDS.org UK, 2017). These values were evident in the meeting I attended as it involved discussions around young missionaries, young volunteers living away from home for 18 or 24 months serving to proselytize individuals they meet to the LDS religion. This was another interactive session involving members considering the struggles missionaries face as well as what church members can do to provide support.

Throughout the service I found all the people I met were friendly, welcoming and eager to help. Questions I had were answered and every religious act explained, for example the significance of the partaking of the sacrament (The Lord's supper) was explained as a time for repenting from the previous week and cleansing for the week ahead. The people I met appeared honest and open, several times throughout the meeting personal testimonies were shared with individuals becoming overwhelmed by emotion as they discussed what had led them to the religion. When conducting background research into the LDS church, I noticed a section of their website dedicated specifically to describing the importance of family as a unit where people learn to love, support, and teach others, skills which are then built on outside of the family (LDS.org UK, 2017). This was noticeable in the church meeting in the range of ages in attendance together from young children to the very elderly.

The Cambridge Companion to New Religious Movements (Hammer and Rothstein, 2012), discusses how many new religions have a charismatic leader and roots in a pre-existing religion. During the early 19th century Joseph Smith became the founder and first leader of the LDS movement and growth through conversion does suggest a level of charisma in him managing to convert people to his thinking. Looking again to the LDS website we can see the high regard in which LDS members hold him as he is described as engaging, patient and

warm; this ties in with Hammer and Rothstein's discussion of a new religion, the charismatic leader they say, will be held in high regard by others.

In an article written by Barker (2010), she discusses how the increase in various religious groups alongside each other in Britain can sometimes lead to fear, mistrust and even hostility towards each other, due primarily to a lack of knowledge of other religions, particularly those less established. During my visit, I saw an understanding of the negative stereotypes surrounding the LDS church as they were discussed during the Relief Society meeting. The women discussed for example the incorrect belief that all people from the LDS church practice polygamy. The marrying of one man to multiple wives was carried out by early members of the LDS church, however in 1904 a church manifesto announced that those entering into plural marriages risk being excommunicated (LDS.org UK, 2017). However members of the LDS church have still experienced some rejection from outsiders due to false beliefs that remain. One church member described how her mother (a member of the Church of England) cried for three days upon hearing of her daughter joining the LDS church. Within this ward I felt that the recognition of stigma stemming from the unknown around a relatively new religion in Britain had led to a stronger emphasis on the need for community within this particular ward. These women spoke strongly about supporting one another and devoted time to discussion on how they could achieve this whilst still trying to interact with their local community.

Looking back on the visit I was struck by the emphasis on community and family as well as the similarity of much of what happened compared to my previous Christian religious experiences. Whilst I found the teaching interesting, it would be beneficial to visit again on a different Sunday with teaching more focused on the Bible and book of Mormon rather than Remembrance. I felt using participant observation worked well as it allowed me to go with an open mind and not be distracted by trying to find elements to fit a pre-conceived theory based on hearsay. If I were to repeat the visit I would focus more on the missionaries themselves and their experiences leaving home as a teenager and living for up to two years

in an unfamiliar environment with limited contact with family and friends. This fieldwork did allow me to explore a new religious movement for the first time, considering academic viewpoints on what constitutes an NRM but also allowing me to see the personal side of the religion, and how important education on religion is as, with Britain being such a multi-cultural nation, people often do suffer fear and rejection from outsiders, ignorant to their way of life.

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