

History



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 Smith was born December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, in the northeastern United States. He later moved with his family to the rural community of Palmyra, New York, where a religious revival occurred in the early 19th century. Confused by the conflicting claims of the various faiths, Joseph went to the Bible for guidance and found the counsel in James 1:5 to “ask of God” for himself.

In a wooded grove near the family farm, Joseph knelt to pray. There in that secluded place, in the most dramatic revelation since biblical times, God and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to the boy and gave him instructions. He was commanded to join none of the existing churches and was told that God would restore to earth the Church originally organized by Jesus Christ, with all of its truths and priesthood authority. Ten years later, after a series of revelations and dramatic visitations to Joseph and others, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was officially organized on April 6, 1830, in Fayette, New York.

THE BOOK OF MORMON: ANOTHER TESTAMENT OF JESUS CHRIST In September of 1823, Joseph experienced a visitation from an ancient prophet, a man who had lived and died in the Western Hemisphere centuries earlier. This resurrected man, whose name was Moroni, directed Joseph

to a hill near Palmyra, where he showed him a religious history of an ancient American civilization engraved on metal plates and buried in the ground. Four years later, Joseph was permitted to take the record and translate it. The Book of Mormon, named for one of the ancient American prophets who had compiled it, was first published in 1830.

The Book of Mormon contains religious writings of civilizations in ancient America between about 2200 B.C. and A.D. 421. 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 to act in His name. The original Twelve Apostles received this priesthood authority under the hands of Jesus Christ Himself. But with their passing, the authority of the apostleship disappeared from the earth. An essential component of the restoration, therefore, was the reestablishment of this priesthood authority in 1829.

In May of that year, a resurrected being who identified himself as John the Baptist appeared to Joseph Smith and his associate Oliver Cowdery, laid his hands on their heads, and gave them the Aaronic Priesthood with the authority to baptize and perform other ordinances. Shortly thereafter, three of the original apostles — Peter, James and John — appeared to Joseph and Oliver and gave them the authority of the apostleship and the Melchizedek, or higher, Priesthood. With the restoration of priesthood authority, Joseph organized The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with six initial members.

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. Swelling ranks of immigrants from Europe and the eastern United States soon provided fuel for growing opposition as well.

To escape the escalating turmoil, Church headquarters 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, on a tract of inhospitable swampland bordering the Mississippi River. Under the leadership of Joseph Smith, they drained the swamps and began

erecting a community of beautiful homes, prosperous farms and businesses. They also built a temple. By 1844 Nauvoo rivaled Chicago in population. But mounting suspicion and anxiety within neighboring communities fed an atmosphere of extreme agitation and distrust. Newspapers in nearby towns 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 a move was once again at hand. This one would become one of the most visionary and prodigious journeys in American history.

As the senior of the Twelve Apostles, Brigham Young succeeded Joseph Smith as the leader of the Church. In February of 1846, he led the Latter-day Saints across the frozen Mississippi River into unsettled Iowa territory. They struggled across Iowa, eventually establishing a settlement called Winter Quarters near modern-day Omaha, Nebraska. There, during the winter and early spring of 1846–47, the Latter-day Saints prepared for their historic trek to the remote valley of the Great Salt Lake, 1,000 miles to the west. Brigham Young's advance party led the way, arriving in the Salt Lake Valley on July 22, 1847.

During the next 22 years, an estimated 68,000 Latter-day Saints filtered into this Great Basin refuge. Some crossed in wagons, but between 1856 and 1860, ten companies of nearly 3,000 men, women and children walked to the valley of the Great Salt Lake pulling handcarts.

Under the direction of Brigham Young, the pioneers established more than 600 communities from southern Alberta to Mexico.

INTO THE MODERN ERA When Utah was granted statehood on January 4, 1896, Church membership totaled a quarter of a million, the majority in Utah. When Church membership reached a million in 1947, one hundred years after the desperate exodus from Nauvoo, it was still largely North American. After 1947, however, the Utah proportion of membership began to shrink almost as rapidly as worldwide growth accelerated. Currently less than 14 percent of all Church members reside in Utah, and fewer than 45 percent of Church members live in the United States. At the end of 2015, the worldwide membership of the Church stood at 15.6 million members.