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Mormonism

by **Keith Horsfall**

When the 'Latter Day Saints' build a multi-million pound temple four miles away in Chorley, it is not the sort of event one can ignore. They chose their site for maximum effect. Their publicity was managed expertly and 100,000 or so visitors went on a conducted tour of the premises. How should we respond? Some reactions remind me of Fraser and Jones out of Dad's Army - 'We're doomed' and an unconvincing, 'Don't panic'. Only the local evangelical and charismatic churches seem to have tried to turn this into an opportunity for evangelism and training.

Now that the temple doors are closed to all but temple-worthy Mormons, I think there is a lot to learn from the experience.

WHY ARE THEY SUCCESSFUL?

- Most sects succeed by exploiting some weaknesses in orthodox churches.
- The Mormon PR machine is very successful in turning all criticism to their own advantage. They manage the media well so that they are seen in a good light - eg pro family, healthy lifestyle.
- They have a united front, the same message from everyone. Contrast the way Anglicanism hits the headlines - and when the Archbishop seeks to appoint a Spin Doctor we fail to see the need!
- Mormonism has a defined membership and standards of giving of time and money. It is a very wealthy organisation.
- Lay people have prominent roles (in fact the 'elders' are often in their late teens and twenties).
- They pay great attention to appearances, publicity and presentation.
- Their people are well trained.

Post-modernism is their friend, at least in the short term - because beliefs are now a matter of taste and the media will treat the LDS Church as seriously as any other. The spiritual climate we live in makes people instinctively suspicious of established bodies and fascinated by whatever is novel. Gullibility rules. Scepticism is reserved only for historic Christianity. Mormon beliefs are quite bizarre and it is a waste of time trying to be clued up on everything they are supposed to believe and do. Discussions with them are like wrestling with tripe. They have the ability to alter beliefs and practices as times change (eg polygamy and racial discrimination are no longer promoted).

Their beliefs and practices show much borrowing from the Masons and Roman Catholicism. (If Mass for the dead, why not Baptism? There is more Scripture for it! If Mary appears at Lourdes, why not an angel in Arizona?). Mormons know how to make the most of the basic instincts of man - salvation by works, the pleasure of belonging to an inner circle with secrets, fascination with ancestors, the hope that family life in heaven will continue the same only better, etc.

MY VISION

I am convinced that Christians have to learn from the growth of such a movement. But first of all our aim must be to get Mormons talking about Christianity, not the other way round. Secondly, the arrival of these

people exposes the ignorance of basic Christianity in our Church members. We have to ask ourselves why our people feel lost for words when they get visits from Mormons and JW's.

I suggest two problems: (1) we tend to rely on preaching to do all the educating; (2) the spread of anti-intellectualism and experientialism especially among Evangelicals. Education has to go beyond the spoken word to homework, classwork and training by doing. The conviction that doctrine plays a vital role in Christian life has to be recovered. Maybe the Mormons will put us under a healthy pressure to educate our lay people better.

Believing in God's sovereignty, I have no doubt that there is an opportunity for the Gospel and the recovery of God's glory in the arrival of these uninvited guests. I am urging people to pray that many Mormons will hear the Gospel by having good but unsettling contacts with Christians. In my vision, the Mormons will regret the day they built in Chorley because so many of their members defect to Gospel churches and the churches, are stimulated by the challenge to put their own house in order.

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