

Church Statistical Report for 2003

F. Michael Watson

For the information of the members of the Church, the First Presidency has issued the following report concerning the growth and status of the Church as of December 31, 2003:

Number of Church units

Stakes	2,624
Districts	644
Missions	337
Wards and branches	26,237

Church membership

Total membership	11,985,254
Increase in children of record during 2003	99,457
Converts baptized during 2003 . .	242,923

Missionaries

Full-time missionaries	56,237
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Temples

Temples dedicated during 2003	2
(Brisbane Australia, Redlands California)	
Temples in operation	116

Prominent members who have passed away since last April

Elder Jacob de Jager, an emeritus General Authority; *Elder Andrew Wayne Peterson*, an emeritus General Authority; *Elder Robert L. Simpson*, an emeritus General Authority; *Sister Elaine Cannon*, former Young Women general president; *Brother Roy M. Darley*, former Tabernacle organist.

President Faust

We will now be pleased to hear from Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He will be followed by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, also of the Quorum of the Twelve.

Elder Russell M. Nelson

Roots and branches

Each time we experience security checks at an airport, we are asked to show photographic identification. We understand the need and comply, knowing that it is necessary and helpful. But I submit my photograph as evidence of my true identity somewhat apologetically. If someone were to examine my passport photo and say that it's a good likeness, I would know it's time to go home. But I feel apologetic for another reason. The photo shows nothing about my roots and branches. They are important parts of my identity. Could you tell much about a tree by looking at a photograph of only its trunk? No! Roots and branches of trees provide much more in-

formation. So it is with us both *personally* and with *our religion*.

Personal roots

Personal roots are really important. Sister Nelson and I know a family that proudly display evidence of their ancestral roots with large paintings portrayed on the *outside* walls of their home. Beautiful artwork there depicts distinctive patterns of identity for both of their family lines.

When relatives gather around a new baby, one inevitably hears comments such as "She has red hair, just like her mother" or "He has a dimple in his chin, just like his father."

Each of us has ancestral roots. Each man has received some genetic markers that are just like those of his father. Each woman has received some genetic markers that are just like those of her mother.¹ In addition, each of us has received other genetic gifts that make us unique.

Because we have a spirit as well as a physical body,² we also have spiritual roots that go way back. They shape our values, our beliefs, and our faith. Spiritual roots guide our commitment to the ideals and teachings of the Lord.³

Children have a natural desire to emulate the examples of their parents. Generally, boys incline toward the attitudes and work of their fathers; girls aspire to live as their mothers do. And you parents, don't be too surprised if, sometime along the way, your children become better than you.

Personal roots, physical and spiritual, merit gratitude. For my life, I am grateful to my Creator as well as to my dear parents and progenitors. I try to honor them by learning of them and serving them in the temple.⁴ Parents have a responsibility to share knowledge of their personal roots with their children and grandchildren. Learning their history together unifies a family.

Religious roots

We also need to know the roots of our religion. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, though officially organized in 1830, has been restored from roots that also go way back. Truths from previous dispensations have now been gathered, amplified, and clarified.⁵ For us as parents and teachers, we have an excellent teaching resource in the Articles of Faith. Written by the Prophet Joseph Smith,⁶ this document refers to many doctrines that undergird our religion. It mentions the Godhead, moral agency, the Fall of Adam, and the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It spells out the foundational prin-

ciples and ordinances of faith, repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. It addresses matters of priesthood authority and organization. It notes as sacred scripture the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, and an open canon of continuing revelation from God. And it proclaims the actuality of the gathering of Israel.⁷ What a treasure-house of truth is this precious document as we teach of our religious roots.

Other revealed doctrines at the root of our religion include the Creation, the Resurrection, the law of tithing, prayer, and the consummate blessings of the temple. As we teach of these doctrines, we realize how very firm is our foundation. As we apply these doctrines in our lives, the roots of our religion become part of our own spiritual strength.

Converts need to strengthen their religious roots. President Gordon B. Hinckley has taught that each convert needs a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing by the good word of God. With such roots to support them and their children, precious converts become pioneers for their own families to follow.

Unfortunately some members of faithful families drift away because their own roots are weak. My heart aches when I learn of those who turn from the faith of their pioneer predecessors. One professionally acclaimed friend and gifted son of faithful ancestors has allowed one doctrinal doubt to dim his view of the fulness of the gospel and drive an ever-widening wedge between him and the temple. Another acquaintance, a sweet sister with illustrious pioneer progenitors, now politely states that she is not a "practicing member" of the Church.

Have these dear people become so fashionable that they have forgotten their roots? Have they forgotten what the Restoration really means and what it cost? Have they forgotten their pioneer heritage and their lineage as declared in patriarchal

blessings? For a few fleeting favors now, would they forget and forfeit eternal life? Oblivious to the roots that have blessed them, they no longer enjoy the spiritual sparkle of Saints engaged in the work of Almighty God.

Their noble ancestors “were brought to the knowledge of the truth . . . according to the spirit of revelation and of prophecy, and the power of God.” Their forebears “were converted unto the Lord [and] never did fall away.”⁸ How will those progenitors feel about the drift of their descendants? Their disappointment will likely turn to sorrow, for fruit detached from roots cannot long survive.

The Lord issued this solemn warning:

“After ye have been nourished by the good word of God . . . , will ye reject these words . . . of the prophets; and will ye reject all the words which have been spoken concerning Christ, . . . and the power of God, and the gift of the Holy Ghost, . . . and make a mock of the great plan of redemption, which [has] been laid for you?

“. . . The resurrection . . . will bring you to stand with shame and awful guilt before the bar of God.”⁹

I plead with each of us to heed that sacred warning.

Personal branches

Just as our roots determine to a significant degree who we are, our branches are also an important extension of our identity. Personal branches bear the fruit of our loins.¹⁰ Scriptures teach, “By their fruits ye shall know them.”¹¹ Earlier in life, Sister Nelson and I often met young people who said they felt like they knew us because they knew our children. Now we are greeted fondly by those who know us because they know our grandchildren.

Religious branches

In much the same way, our religion is known by the fruit of its branches. Re-

cently I met with some government officials from a land far from here who were deeply impressed with the Church and its efforts throughout the world. They liked our teachings about the family and wanted copies of our proclamation to the world and guidebooks for family home evening. They wanted to know more about our welfare program and humanitarian help. We complied as we could and then shifted attention from *what* we do to *why* we do it. I explained with an analogy to a tree. “You are attracted by various fruits of our faith,” I said. “They are plentiful and powerful. But you cannot savor this fruit unless you know the tree that produces it. And you cannot understand the tree unless you comprehend its roots. With our religion, you cannot have the fruits without the roots.” This they understood.

Fruits from the branching tree of the gospel include “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, [and] faith.”¹² President Harold B. Lee once said: “Beautiful, luscious fruit does not grow unless the roots of the . . . tree have been planted in rich, fertile soil and unless due care is given to proper pruning, cultivation, and irrigation. So likewise the luscious fruits of virtue and chastity, honesty, temperance, integrity, and fidelity are not to be found growing in that individual whose life is not founded on a firm testimony of the truths of the gospel and of the life and the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹³

The fruits of the gospel are delicious to those who obey the Lord. We pursue an education knowing that “the glory of God is intelligence.”¹⁴ The blessing of tithing comes by paying tithing.¹⁵ Rewards are reaped from the Word of Wisdom by obedience to it.¹⁶ We learn from experience borne of gospel living that prayer, honoring the Sabbath day, and partaking of the sacrament protect us from the bondage of sin. We shun pornography and immorality, knowing that the peace of personal purity

can be ours only as we live according to the laws of the gospel.

The Lord gave this promise and commandment: “Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. . . . I am the vine, ye are the branches.”¹⁷ Simply summarized, life’s greatest blessings will come to us if our love of Jesus Christ is rooted deeply in our hearts.¹⁸

Divinity is rooted in each of us

Personal identity is much more than a passport photograph. We also have roots and branches. Divinity is rooted in each of us. “We all are the work of [our Creator’s] hand.”¹⁹ We are eternal beings. In premortal realms, we brethren were foreordained for our priesthood responsibilities.²⁰ Before the foundation of the world, women were prepared that they may bear children and glorify God.²¹

We came to this mortal experience to acquire a body, to be tried and tested.²² We are to form families and be sealed in holy temples, with joy and loving relationships that endure eternally. To these everlasting truths we are personally rooted.

Branches of our families and of the gospel bear fruit to enrich our lives. God’s work and His glory—“to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man”—can become ours.²³ We can dwell with Him and with our families forever. Those blessings will be granted to the faithful in His own way and time.²⁴

God lives. Jesus is the Christ. Joseph Smith is the revelator and prophet of this last dispensation. The Book of Mormon is true. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord’s kingdom established once again upon the earth. President Gordon B. Hinckley is His living prophet. If rooted to these truths, the fruit of our branches will remain.²⁵ I so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. In addition to the genetic information each child receives from his or her mother and father, a small set of mitochondrial DNA comes from the mother to both her son(s) and her daughter(s).
2. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:15.
3. See Ephesians 3:14–19; Colossians 2:6–7.
4. See Doctrine and Covenants 128:15.
5. See Doctrine and Covenants 128:18.
6. The Articles of Faith were included in a letter to Mr. John Wentworth, editor and proprietor of a Chicago newspaper; first published in the *Times and Seasons*, Mar. 1, 1842; see *Ensign*, July 2002, 26–32.
7. This document also mentions gifts of the Spirit that enlighten the lives of members of the Church. It foretells of great events of the latter days, such as the restoration of the ten tribes, the establishment of Zion, and the millennial reign of Jesus Christ upon a renewed earth. It includes principles of freedom of worship, tolerance, and obedience to law. And it concludes with an expression pertaining to our perception of life and of lofty personal ideals.
8. Alma 23:6.
9. Jacob 6:7–9.
10. See, for example, 2 Nephi 3:6–7.
11. Matthew 7:20; 3 Nephi 14:20; see also Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 7:25.
12. Galatians 5:22.
13. *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (1974), 218–19.
14. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.
15. See Malachi 3:10; 3 Nephi 24:10.
16. See Doctrine and Covenants 89:18–21.
17. John 15:3–5.
18. See Ephesians 3:17.
19. Isaiah 64:8.
20. See Alma 13:1–5.
21. See Doctrine and Covenants 132:63.
22. “Even as Abraham” (D&C 101:4). See also Hebrews 11:17.
23. Moses 1:39.
24. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:68. When any blessing is obtained from God, “it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated” (D&C 130:21).
25. See John 15:16.