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Strangers and Foreigners or Fellow Citizens with the Saints? How Leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Have Portrayed Immigration Over Time

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Although The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is considered a conservative religion and for decades its U.S. members have been among the most reliable supporters of the Republican Party, the Church's position and rhetoric in recent years and the opinions of many of its members toward immigration clearly diverge from the Republican agenda and the opinions of other conservative religious Americans. This study seeks to better understand Latter-day Saints' view of immigration by evaluating how leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have talked about immigration over time. To do this it examines all addresses given in the Church's General Conferences from 1851 to 2019. It finds that Church leaders have consistently portrayed immigration and immigrants in positive terms and that the support today is in line with the tone and approach that Church leaders have exhibited in the past. Among other things, Church leaders have identified themselves as descendants of immigrants, coupled immigration with the history of the Church, emphasized the need to help immigrants, and used immigrants as examples of behavior that people should emulate. The article concludes by discussing how Church leaders have addressed immigration in recent years when members' opinions about immigration are anything but uniform.

Largely because of the stances the Republican and Democratic parties have taken on a number of important social issues, Latter-day Saints, beginning in the 1970s, have become perhaps the most reliable supporters of the Republican Party in the United States (Campbell, Karpowitz, and Monson 2016, 141–142, chap 4). Latter-day Saints identify with and vote Republican and, more than any other American religious group, call themselves conservative (Campbell, Green, and Monson 2014, 78–80).

Despite their partisan and ideological loyalties, Latter-day Saints' view of immigration strays from conservative and Republican orthodoxy and from

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the typical position of Evangelicals and other religious groups closely aligned with the Republican Party. A 2011 national survey, for example, showed that Latter-day Saints are more supportive of increasing immigration than people of other religions, except for Jews, while Evangelicals are less supportive than any other religious group (Campbell, Karpowitz, and Monson 2016, 146). In a 2011 Pew Research Center survey, 45 percent of Latter-day Saints viewed immigration as strengthening the country and 41 percent considered it a burden. By contrast, 27 percent of white Evangelicals felt immigration strengthens the country and 59 percent saw it as a burden (Pew Research Center 2012). The 2016 Next Mormons Survey showed that close to 60 percent of Latter-day Saints agreed that “immigrants today strengthen our country” (Riess 2019, 125). Similarly, a 2018 study conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago found that 55 percent of Latter-day Saints believed that immigrants help the country (Fingerhut and McCombs 2018).

Not surprisingly, support for undocumented immigration is noticeably less than for immigration as a whole. However, it is still greater among Latter-day Saints than other religious adherents. A 2019 study showed that 58 percent of Latter-day Saints held a negative view of undocumented immigrants and 37 percent favored deporting them, compared to 69 percent of white Evangelicals who viewed undocumented immigrants negatively and 55 percent who wanted them deported (Cox 2019).

Although these studies illustrate that Latter-day Saints are divided over their views of immigration and immigrants, they also have a more favorable view than adherents of other conservative religions. One researcher wrote, “In several national surveys, including research from Pew and the Next Mormons Survey, Mormons have demonstrated support for the idea that immigrants ‘strengthen’ America ‘because of their hard work and talents.’ The difference is especially noteworthy when Mormons are compared to other groups that are also predominately white and politically conservative” (Riess 2018a).

To better understand the perspective of Latter-day Saints on immigration, this study examines how leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have talked about it over time. How often have Church leaders discussed immigration, and how has it been portrayed? Does the Church’s pride in its pioneer heritage affect how leaders have depicted immigration? Has the message changed now that the majority of Church members in the United States are integrated into the mainstream of American culture and immigration is but a distant experience in their family tree? How have Church

leaders rhetorically handled the divide in Latter-day Saint opinion about immigration in recent years, and has their rhetoric changed now that the Church is more of a global institution?

Studying the rhetoric of Latter-day Saints leaders is relevant to understanding Latter-day Saint opinion. Although there are examples to the contrary (e.g., Van Leer 1995; Fertig 2021), the literature shows that members follow their Church leaders, even when it “runs counter to their ideological inclinations” (Campbell, Green, and Monson 2014, chap. 6; see also Campbell and Monson 2003; Nteta and Wallsten 2012; Campbell, Karpowitz, and Monson 2016, 141–146; Wallsten and Nteta 2016). In large measure this reflects how Church members view their highest leaders, whom they sustain as prophets, seers, and revelators. Members are taught to give strict heed to their leaders, especially the president of the Church (also referred to as the prophet), whose role is to reveal the word of God to the people (Britsch and Britsch 1992; McConkie 1992). With their belief in prophets and modern and ongoing revelation, “it would be difficult to propose a modern religion in which the rhetoric of religious leaders plays a more significant role than in Mormonism” (Shepherd and Shepherd 1986, 126).

Methods

To evaluate how Church leaders have talked about immigration, this study examines the addresses they have given in General Conferences from 1851 to 2019. These conferences are semi-annual, multi-day meetings held in Salt Lake City the first weekends of April and October. They have been widely disseminated to Church members throughout the world via television, radio, the Church’s satellite system, and the internet; all of the addresses are published the next month in the Church’s monthly magazine and are available on the Church’s website. General Conference addresses are subsequently used in Sunday meetings across the world and families and individuals are encouraged to make them a source of study.

Certainly, Church leaders have said more about human migration in other venues and a search of books, newspapers, and websites could be used to ascertain their views. However, General Conferences provide an ideal source of material. They provide a consistent and uniform measuring stick and more accurately reflect the dogma and thinking of the Church’s highest leaders. They are broadly circulated to the membership of the Church, and, for a researcher, are accessible to obtain (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984a; Shepherd

and Shepherd 1986). As an example, it is likely that a researcher would find more about what Church leaders say in modern times because of the ease of accessing newspapers, although that might not be an accurate reflection of how often or in what ways Church leaders have addressed immigration issues over time. Moreover, Latter-day Saints' belief in ongoing revelation along with "their devotion to prophetic authority make these conferences a particularly useful source for understanding official Mormon convictions and concerns" (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984a, 30), and "conveying to members an official position on matters of doctrine, policy and a variety of other institutional expectations" (Shepherd and Shepherd 1984b, 131).

The Conference talks were searched using www.lds-general-conference.org, which covers 1851 to present. The search terms were emigration, immigration, and migration, and variations of these words. Any Conference address that had at least one mention of one of the search terms and was relevant to human migration in some way was included in the database, even if immigration wasn't the main point of the talk.

1. **Example.** Addresses included in this category portray migrants as having certain characteristics, attributes, or behaviors, or describe them as attaining certain accomplishments or failures.
2. **Welfare.** This category includes addresses that argue that migrants need help or are the beneficiaries of help; portray migrants of taking advantage of people's generosity; or discuss whether people should help migrants.
3. **Church History.** This category of addresses recount stories from the Church's past, including Church members coming to the United States, crossing the plains, or building up the Church in some way.
4. **Personal History.** This includes speakers who identify with immigrants, perhaps by discussing their ancestors who were immigrants, identifying themselves as immigrants, or telling of an immigrant who played a meaningful role in their life.
5. **Scripture.** This is counted when the address refers in some way to immigration in the Bible or the Book of Mormon.

Not all addresses fit into one of these five categories, and some addresses are counted in multiple categories. For example, a speaker could recall the migration of Saints from Great Britain to Utah as both Church History and Example if the speaker endorses immigrants as an example of industry, perseverance, and faith in building up the Church and Utah.

Findings

Table 1 on the following page shows the number of talks that had the keywords in them, broken down by decade. There are 590 addresses that contained at least one of these terms; because some addresses contained more than one keyword, the figures in Table 1 add up to 695 rather than 590.

Not surprisingly, the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s had more talks about immigration than any other decade besides the 1920s, when immigration consumed much of the political discussion in the country. Together the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s comprise 32 percent of all the General Conference talks that mention immigration. It was during these three decades that the Church experienced the largest influx of immigrants moving to Utah, with an estimate of more than 85,000 members who emigrated from Europe from 1846 to 1887 (Arrington and Bitton 1992, 136). The addresses in the early years often discussed the current situation of Saints coming to the Salt Lake Valley; they encouraged Church members to be generous with their money in bringing immigrants to Utah and also helping them once they arrived. In later years there were not as many talks addressing immigration. When the topic did occur, it was not the central focus but usually was used to exemplify or build upon a different point.

These first three decades also contain the most negative portrayals of immigration of any period. Of the 590 total addresses, only 25 portrayed immigration negatively, but 14 of those were delivered in the first three decades. Seven of the 14 were in the 1850s, one was in the 1860s, and another six were in the 1870s. Twelve of the 14 dealt with the Perpetual Emigrating Fund (PEF), a program that was created in 1849 to provide loans for members who needed financial help to reach Utah. The program called for individuals who received loans to repay them once they arrived in Utah and had the ability to pay; this repayment would then be used to loan money to others who needed help. From 1852 until 1887, when Congress disincorporated the fund and took over its assets (Mathieson and Oman 2017, 19; Mulder 1956, 426–427), the PEF assisted 26,000 Latter-day Saints who traveled from Europe to Utah (Jensen and Hartley 1992, 674).

These 12 addresses were categorized as negative because the talks were critical of immigrants who had not paid their debts to the PEF. President Brigham Young gave three such speeches (in 1854, 1856, and 1870). In the one from 1854, titled “Debtors to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund,” Young maintained that people who had been helped through the PEF should pay their

Table 1. Number of General Conference Addresses, 1851–2019, by Keyword and Decade

	1850s	1860s	1870s	1880s	1890s	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	Total
Emigration	10	33	23	15	6	5	8	11	4	2	2	1	1	1	1	0	4	126
Emigrated	0	1	10	8	5	9	10	11	3	5	3	9	4	1	4	3	2	88
Emigrants	18	6	10	5	6	4	9	5	4	2	5	1	1	0	1	0	1	78
Emigrating	18	4	14	3	1	2	3	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	53
Emigrate	8	10	12	2	2	5	2	3	1	2	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	51
Emigrant	2	0	1	0	1	1	2	3	1	2	1	1	1					12
Emigrations								1			1							2
Emigrational								1										1
Subtotal	56	54	70	33	21	26	34	37	13	13	13	11	6	2	8	7	7	411
Immigration	12	4	0	7	2	2	4	11	3	1	2			4		1	1	54
Immigrants	5	1	1	2	1	2	5	4	1	3	1	2	3	4	4	1	3	43
Immigrant	1			1	1	2	2	3	1	2	3	3	5	1	2	5	2	33
Immigrated	2	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	2	1	1	2	2	4	3	22
Immigrate	1			1	1	0	1	1								1	0	6
Immigrating	2					2							1			1		6
Immigrations															1			1
Subtotal	23	6	3	9	6	6	15	19	6	6	8	6	10	11	9	13	9	165
Migration	1	1			1	1	2	12	5	8	2	6	3	0	10	3	1	56
Migrated	1	1	1	1		2	2	4	1	2	2	1	3	1	1		1	19
Migrate	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1					12
Migrating	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	2	1	1	1		1					13
Migrations	1				1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	1			11
Migratory						1						1				1		3
Migrants							1	1				1						2
Migrant										1			1	1				3
Subtotal	2	4	2	3	1	6	10	22	10	12	6	11	10	2	13	3	2	119
Column Total	81	64	75	45	28	38	59	78	29	31	27	28	26	15	30	23	18	695*

*The total number of addresses is 590. The column adds to 695 because some of the individual addresses contained more than one keyword.

debt rather than putting it off until they became richer (Young 1854, 53). In that same General Conference, Orson Pratt, an apostle, encouraged members to “pay up your debts, pay them up to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund; and let the means be sent back immediately, that those who are starving to death, and are ground down with tyranny, may enjoy the same privileges as you.” Later he said, “What is the duty of the Saints who have come here by the aid and benefit of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund? It is their duty to pay back the debt they own immediately” (Pratt 1854).

John Taylor, an apostle who succeeded Brigham Young as president of the Church in 1880, gave two addresses in 1877 and another two in 1878, all hammering the point that people who had benefited from the fund and were now able to repay their debt should do so. “I hope that those who are still owing for their emigration will be led to reflect upon these things, and consider the situation of the brethren who are now in the same position as they themselves were some years ago” (Taylor 1878).

Joseph F. Smith, an apostle and later president of the Church, decried “the ingratitude, want of charity and dishonor which attaches to individuals who have been so generously assisted out of poverty and oppression, and placed in circumstances to become free and independent, and then neglect or fail to do their duty in these matters.” He continued by saying that “if all was paid up, [there] would be more than sufficient to immigrate to this country all the Saints now in Europe” (Smith 1879).

Although these talks are categorized as negative because they criticized immigrants who had not paid their debts, they were not discouraging immigration. Rather, the speakers exhorted people to pay their debt so the PEF would have more money to distribute and provide more immigrants the same opportunity that the debtors had.

The 1920s, next to the 1850s, was the decade with the most mentions of immigration. Although by the 1920s the migration of Church members had mostly dried up, the number of talks referencing immigration reflects the topic’s importance in the national dialogue. Following a surge of immigration in the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century in the United States, a backlash against immigration developed which culminated with Congress passing the Immigration Act of 1924. This Act distinguished among different groups of immigrants and established race distinctions. Among other things, it created a policy that favored immigrants from western and northern Europe, limited those coming from southern and eastern Europe, and continued the exclusion of Asian immigrants (Perlmann 2018, 201).

Despite the tough talk and discriminatory immigration laws that were passed in that era, the rhetoric of Church leaders did not follow suit. Out of 78 addresses that mentioned immigration during the 1920s, only one of them was negative, and it was not critical of immigration in general. It was given by Joseph W. McMurrin, the president of the California mission. He warned Church members to be careful about leaving their current situations and moving to California, cautioning that if they did not have money they would be “better off” where they were (McMurrin 1925).

It should be mentioned, though, that although their rhetoric was favorable of immigration, Church leaders likely had western and northern Europeans in mind when they talked positively about immigration. The bulk of immigrants to Utah were from western and northern Europe, and when they arrived they were celebrated, helped, and widely accepted (Arrington and Bitton 1992, 135-137). Immigrants from other areas of the world, on the other hand, were not as welcomed among the saints. It seems that Church leaders and members shared many of the same attitudes about certain racial and ethnic groups that the country harbored at the time (Harris 2010a; Harris 2010b; Reeve 2015). The most negative reference to immigration was given in 1941 by J. Reuben Clark, first counselor in the First Presidency. In the address he discussed the war in Europe and the United States being a choice land. He mentioned that in 1923, and many times since (but not in General Conferences), he had warned of many trends that he labeled “perils of these times,” which included “the unrestricted immigration of aliens who were foreign and in tradition hostile to our systems of government” (Clark 1941).

Since 1941 only four talks were given that were categorized as negative. Two of them revisited a point made many decades before: they encouraged members to stay in their home countries and promised the people that they would enjoy the same blessings of the gospel, regardless of where they lived (Nelson 2006; Uchtdorf 2005). Russell M. Nelson, who is now the president of the Church, said, “in the early days of the Church, conversion often meant emigration as well. But now the gathering takes place in each nation. ... Every nation is the gathering place of its own people. The place of gathering for Brazilian Saints is in Brazil; the place of gathering for Nigerian Saints is in Nigeria; the place of gathering for Korean Saints is in Korea; and so forth. ... Zion is wherever righteous Saints are” (Nelson 2006).

Table 2 on the following page highlights how the keywords were used in all of the talks indexed from 1851 to 2019. It shows that speakers tied Church

Table 2. Number of General Conference Addresses Mentioning Variations of Immigration, Emigration, and Migration, 1851–2019, by Topic

Example	Welfare	Church History	Personal History	Scripture
128	131	345	59	46

history with immigration 345 times, by far the most common way immigration was referred to. The Church has always placed emphasis on its history, and it is not uncommon for a General Conference address to refer to that history in some way. Perhaps this helps explain why Latter-day Saints are slightly more sympathetic to immigration than some other religious conservatives. Although the United States is a nation of immigrants and the people opposed to immigration are the descendants of immigrants, the fact that the Church has discussed immigration in mostly positive ways may make it more likely that Church members know their family history and Church history and more closely identify with immigrants.

A few Conference talks in recent years provide a taste of how immigration has been portrayed in General Conference talks. One, given in 2001 by Gordon B. Hinckley, who at the time was president of the Church, shows how Church history is used to build support for a modern day program. He spoke of the importance of the Perpetual Emigrating Fund in helping converts to the Church immigrate to Utah, and praised their contributions to Utah and the Church. “They became a great strength to the work here. Some of them came with needed skills, such as stone masonry, and others developed skills. They were able to perform a tremendous service in constructing buildings, including the Salt Lake Temple and Tabernacle” and became “an important part of the family of the Church in these mountain valleys.” He specifically tied them to the people of the Church today: “I believe that many within the sound of my voice are descendants of those who were blessed by reason of this fund. You are today prosperous and secure because of what was done for your forebears” (Hinckley 2001).

President Hinckley then introduced the Perpetual Education Fund, which was to work similarly to the Perpetual Emigrating Fund. Through the Perpetual Education Fund, money would be loaned to help young people in the Church in other countries to pay for the training and schooling necessary to get better jobs. Once they completed their training, they would pay back the money to the Perpetual Education Fund so others would also have that opportunity.

One talk, categorized as both Personal History and Example, was delivered by Joseph B. Wirthlin, an apostle, who related the influence a bishop had on young men, including Wirthlin and others who had become prominent Church leaders. In the first of five paragraphs about this bishop, Wirthlin described him as a “German immigrant, a convert to the Church, and he spoke with a thick accent” (2007, 46). He then discussed what a wonderful person he was: “You could scarcely think of Bishop Perschon without thinking of his concern and compassion for others and his untiring commitment to teach that same quality to others” (2007, 47).

Another talk that was categorized the same way was given by Henry B. Eyring, counselor in the First Presidency of the Church. He told a story of two of his ancestors who joined the Church. One was a young girl in Switzerland and another was a young man who was “an immigrant to the United States from Germany, living in St. Louis, Missouri. The two met as they crossed the plains to Utah and got married.” President Eyring continued, “I am among the tens of thousands of descendants of that boy and that girl” (2010, 59).

The Church’s Immigration Communications in Recent Years

In reaction to the increasing salience of immigration issues in national politics and the differing positions and strong opinions that Church members and the public have about immigration, the Church has increasingly been drawn into the immigration debate. In doing so, leaders’ actions and statements have been consistent with the rhetoric of previous generations of Church leaders. They have shown that they are more accepting of immigration than public opinion, current immigration policy, and even many of their own members.

One indication of the controversy surrounding immigration in recent years came with an Arizona law that passed April 23, 2010. The law received widespread notoriety and at the time was labeled the nation’s strictest law against illegal immigration. Among other things, the law required law enforcement officers to ask about a person’s legal status if they had reasonable suspicion the person was in the country illegally. Notably, the legislation was sponsored by Senator Russell Pearce, who was a member of the Church (Archibold 2010a; Archibold 2010b). Although the Arizona law had support among many conservatives and some members of the Church, Utah took a different approach, an approach that was supported by the Church. On November 11, 2010, a number of groups in Utah who favored a pro-immigrant policy held a press conference introducing the Utah Compact, which outlined

five principles they argued should be included in future legislation in Utah: (1) the federal government should handle immigration issues; (2) law enforcement should focus on criminal activities rather than civil violations; (3) families should be supported and kept together; (4) immigrants should be recognized for the economic role they “play as workers and taxpayers”; and (5) Utah should “adopt a humane approach” to the immigrants who are already a part of the community (Utah Compact 2010). On the same day that a press conference was held introducing the Compact, the Church released a statement supporting it (Petrzelka and Jacobs 2016, 157).

Just four months later, on March 15, 2011, Utah passed an immigration policy that mirrored the principles laid out in the Utah Compact. Given the state’s political and demographic characteristics, many experts would have predicted that Utah would pass restrictive immigration laws more in line with what Arizona had done (Petrzelka and Jacobs 2016). Instead, the opposite occurred. Petrzelka and Jacobs argue that the Compact passed in large measure because the Church supported it, both through its initial advocacy and also through subsequent public statements, its lobbying efforts, and the fact that most legislators were Church members (2016; see also Campbell 2012; Jacobs, Keister, Glass and Petrzelka 2015; Mortensen 2011, 6–11).

Other states followed the lead of Arizona instead of Utah, however. With Georgia and Alabama passing tough anti-immigration laws in May and June and other states considering such measures, the Church, on June 10, 2011, issued a statement addressing illegal or undocumented immigration and calling on the federal government to take action. In the statement the Church said that immigration issues “must ultimately be resolved by the federal government,” and that such an approach should be “balanced and civil” and be “consistent with its [the Church’s] tradition of compassion, reverence for family, and its commitment to law.” It also “discourages its members” from being in any country illegally and that nations have the right to enforce their laws. However, it also emphasized that “the bedrock moral issue for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is how we treat each other as children of God” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2011). Since this statement the Church has referred to it a number of times when the news media has questioned it on various immigration topics.

The concern about families has been a recurring issue in the Church’s statements. In 2018, in the wake of controversial Trump administration policies, it issued two official statements. On January 26, 2018, less than two weeks

after a new First Presidency was established, the Church issued a statement addressing President Trump's reversal the previous September of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. This policy, started under President Obama, allowed some unauthorized immigrants who had been brought to the United States as children a legal path to work (Mims and Noyce 2018; McDonnell Nieto del Rio and Jordan 2022). The Church stated that "the Church does not advocate any specific legislation or executive solution" but hoped for "a provision for strengthening families and keeping them together." It pushed for those "sometimes referred to as 'Dreamers'" and stated that "these individuals have demonstrated a capacity to serve and contribute positively in our society, and we believe they should be granted the opportunity to continue to do so" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2018a). Similar to many General Conference talks over the years, the Church personalized the issue in the statement by tying its past with modern immigration issues, explaining that "most of our early Church members emigrated from foreign lands to live, work, and worship, blessed by the freedoms and opportunities offered in this great nation" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2018a).

The second statement addressed a Trump policy started April 2018 that separated children from their parents who had entered the United States illegally. Although the Trump Administration hoped that the "zero tolerance" approach would discourage immigrants from coming to the United States without authorization (Jordan 2018), the policy was roundly criticized (Yoon-Hendricks and Greenberg 2018), and the Church joined the chorus June 18. The statement criticized the "forced separation of children from their parents now occurring at the US-Mexico border" and affirmed that "we are deeply troubled by the aggressive and insensitive treatment of these families. It reemphasized its position "that immigration reform should strengthen families and keep them together" and called on "national leaders to take swift action to correct this situation and seek for rational, compassionate solutions" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2018b).

Church leaders have also given attention to refugees. In a 2015 letter that was to be read in sacrament meetings throughout the world, Church leaders encouraged members to donate money to the Church Humanitarian Fund and to participate in local efforts to help refugees (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2015). In the spring of 2016, Church leaders started the "I Was a Stranger" refugee relief effort, which encouraged members to assist

refugees in their own communities. Leaders gave talks on this topic in the April General Conference and the Church established a website showing how people could participate in helping refugees. Notably, these talks, along with a video, tied the experiences of early Church members being driven from their homes because of their religious beliefs with the current plight of refugees (Wright 2018, 66–69). On December 2, 2019 the Church issued another statement supporting refugees and encouraging members to volunteer their “time, talents, and friendship” to welcome and integrate them into their communities (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2019).

In 2021, the Church issued a news release highlighting the “more than a dozen” welcome centers the Church has in seven states and one in Canada that are “part of the Church’s Immigrant Services Initiative, which since 2015 has helped immigrants and refugees integrate into their new communities.” The news release began, “When Dan and Lorrie Curriden look at the faces of the immigrants they serve in Las Vegas, they see the courage of their own immigrant grandparents. Whether one is a new immigrant or five generations removed from one, Dan said, ‘we all benefit from the fact that somebody in our ancestry had the guts to leave the place where they came from, into the unknown, and find a better life for their children in this great country’” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2021a).

Later that summer, the Church revised the General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to include a section titled “immigration,” and another titled “refugees.” Under “immigration” it states that “Church members offer their time, talents, and friendship to welcome immigrants and refugees as members of their communities.” Under “refugees,” it used the same phrase but excluded “immigrants” from the sentence (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 2021b, 38.8.18).

Discussion

The evaluation of General Conference addresses from 1851 to 2019 reveals that Church leaders talked about immigration and rarely did so negatively. They have tied immigration in with Church history, taught that people have a responsibility to help immigrants, used immigrants as examples people should emulate, and identified their ancestors as immigrants, among other things. The fact that they have talked about immigration in General Conference suggests the ways they have discussed it in other venues, such as in other meetings, Church publications, lesson materials, and media interviews. Conference

talks represent Church teachings and thought. If leaders are saying something in General Conference, they are likely also mentioning it in other meetings and activities.

Although Church leaders' message about immigration has been consistent in its tone, the frequency of that message has varied. There were many Conference talks about immigration in the early decades of Latter-day Saints being in Utah—it was the story of the Church at the time—and again in the 1920s when immigration was a dominant issue in national politics. In recent years as immigration again became salient nationally and consequently in the Church as well, Church leaders continued with many of the same themes as before, including members' responsibility to help immigrants and refugees and the importance of immigration in Church history. The difference in recent years, though, is not in the message but what methods they are using to deliver the message. Instead of increasing the frequency of talking about immigration in General Conference, which would give more attention and credence to what they say, Church leaders have elected to address specific immigration issues through policies and statements.

One reason for this approach might be that the Church is no longer as Utah or United States-centric as in the past. With more than half of its members living outside of the United States (Walch 2023), discussing immigration in General Conference, especially in reaction to what is occurring in the United States, may be too prescriptive for a worldwide membership facing different situations in their respective countries. Moreover, immigration is a sensitive issue in other parts of the world as well and a General Conference address about immigration risks antagonizing members who do not agree with Church leaders about immigration. In the United States, for example, despite Latter-day Saints having a more positive view of immigration than members of other conservative religious faiths, a substantial number of Latter-day Saints disagree with the Church's position. Indeed, Church leaders likely believe that highlighting immigration policy in General Conference in such a politically polarizing era would further the schism between Church policy that does not ask about people's legal status (Campbell, Karpowitz, Monson 2016, 146–147) and Church members who argue that it is against Church doctrine to have a “don't ask, don't tell” policy that openly flouts the nation's laws (Mortensen 2011).

When Church leaders have spoken directly and extensively about human migration in recent years, they chose to rally their members behind

refugees rather than immigrants. Although the “I Was a Stranger” campaign addressed an international crisis that Church leaders likely would argue was more appropriate than immigration for a worldwide church, it was also an easier sell to its members. Similar to questions about the role of women and gays in the Church (Prince 2019; Jordan 2020), immigration is an issue that whatever Church leaders do, will frustrate and divide Church membership. Although studies show that Latter-day Saints are responsive to Church leaders, even when those leaders are challenging the members’ own ideological beliefs (Campbell, Green, and Monson 2014, chap. 6; see also Nteta and Wallsten 2012; Wallsten and Nteta 2016), Church leaders have to be careful going too far astray from where Church members are willing to follow.

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