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ABSTRACT

The Global Journal reported an estimated 10 million NGOs worldwide and in Kenya alone, the number rose to 11,262 by June 2019 (Non-Governmental Organizations Co-ordination Board, 2019). Though committed to alleviating the same issues, the existence of so many organizations breeds vast differences in approaches. Are the issues simply too complex for a handful of organizations to fix or are the organizations themselves becoming an integral part of the problem? Most organizations fall short in evaluating their effectiveness, partly because there is no standard model by which to measure success. While it would be nearly impossible to design a perfect model for every organization in every region of the world, there are three themes that must be present in effectiveness models. These themes include: the inclusion of participatory data, the eventual removal of the donor/donee relationship, and a measurable component that allows for comparisons over time. This paper grapples with these ideas and raises other concerns, mainly through the analysis of two organizations, Compassion International, and Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO). My studies found that while there are many approaches to alleviating poverty and educating youth in Kenya, projects focusing on women and girls' education can be used as a positive indicator of growth when evaluated properly.

The study begins with a discussion on Kenya as an area of developmental interest. It then transitions to a discussion on women's education as an indicator of growth, discussing the various ways in which current evaluation methods of development fall short. Using the proposed themes as a model of gauging an organization's effectiveness, the study then compares two prominent non-governmental organizations focused on education in Kenya. Finally, the study ends with a discussion on broadening the scope and definition of education in Kenya in order to enact widespread societal change.

Introduction

Kenya has long held a prominent place in the world of humanitarian aid and geopolitical interest. Their unique history of British and Portuguese colonialism still flavors the culture and organizational structures today. In fact, the Kenyan educational system was based on the British educational system (Gatua, 2011, p.19).¹ This is important to note when introducing strategies of decreasing poverty. Special care has to be taken to fully understand the complexity of history and culture in order to discern the best approaches to development.

Further, Kenya's geographical location, situated on the Eastern coast of Africa has direct access to the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Aronson, 2013, p. 25). The location of Kenya makes it a part of both East Africa and the Horn of Africa. Historically, this positioning has highlighted Kenya as a prime target for geopolitical influence and intervention. The British commonwealth has long held interest in the area, yet there are rising world players vying for influence in the region as well (Everill, 2013, p. 126). For example, China's foreign aid expenditures have consistently risen to include a higher percentage of aid to Africa as depicted in the diagram below.

¹Many of the social behaviors are associated with African patriarchy and other cultural systems. For example, while English serves as the official language, Swahili is the national language spoken. This is one example of the dichotomy of culture and history in modern day Kenya.

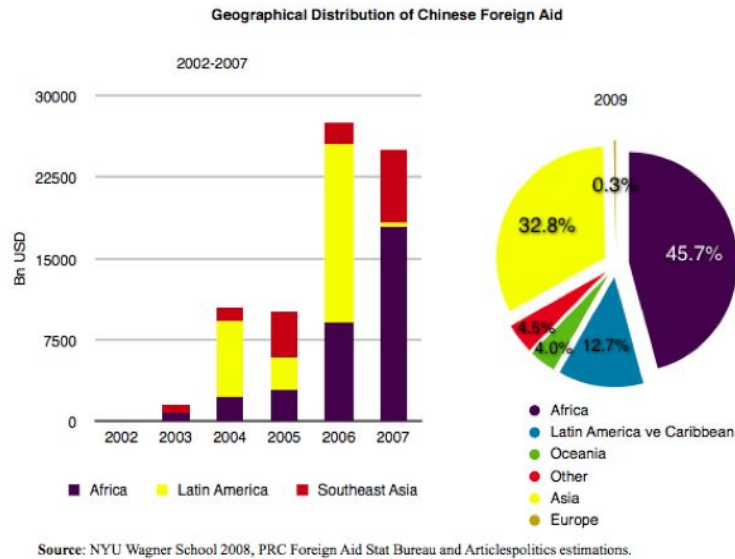


Fig. 2 NYU Wagner School. *Geographical Distribution of Chinese Foreign Aid*. 2008.

Countries use different methods to garner support and a popular one in recent centuries has been to provide aid. Notably, "the sack of relief grain... [can be] far more effective than the barrel of a gun as a technology of control" (Ibid). Giving aid helps to build important alliances and can support transitions to democratic governments, which is why aid has become a key part of U.S. [and other countries'] foreign policies (Bonasso, 2013).

Demographically, Kenya has a population of roughly 40 million people, of which 45 percent live below the poverty line (Lee, 2010). There are extremely concentrated neighborhoods of poverty, pointing to high levels of income inequality. The dichotomy between the rich and the poor is also manifested in access to resources and education. Access to education is skewed with an attendance ratio in primary schools of 86% for the rich and 61% for the poor (Suri, 2008, p. 4). While government aid has tended to focus more on food and infrastructure aid, there is an overwhelming number of outside nongovernmental organizations and relief agencies that have worked to provide educational support in attempts to alleviate poverty in the region.

While each agency has their own method of implementing educational opportunities in the region, the goal generally remains the same. The focus is on the development of individuals and eventually, communities to rise out of the cycle of poverty. This creates interesting tensions between the overarching end goals of development and what needs to occur at the level of individualized, personal development. Therefore, when one talks about the effectiveness of development, they must take into consideration both the macro and micro factors involved.

Focus on Women's Education

It has been shown that when a woman has access to education, she is more likely to bring income into the home, therefore benefitting not only herself, but those that live in the household (Shetty & Hans, 2015, p. 1). In this way, women's access to education not only leads to their personal development, but has long term benefits that reach those in her household as well. Even further, women's access to education has been linked to overall community development and societal growth. In sum, UN findings have shown drastic increases in adulthood earnings, GDP, decreases in child marriage, and economic benefits from reduced population growth that come as a result of increased women's education (Wodon, Montenegro, Nguyen, & Onagoruwa, 2018, pp. 1-3).

Despite the belief in the broad impacts of women's education becoming pervasive amongst development practitioners and scholars, it is unclear what data have been used to prove this idea and whether they fall short of the task. The conclusory evidence has been helpful in comparative studies, such as the analysis between men and women's education, in which men are found to spend "twice as much money on alcohol and tobacco as on education" (Kristof and

WuDunn, 2015, p. 119). Such research points to, or implies that, women's education is an overarching solution, but does little except argue that giving a woman access to education will have larger impacts than education for a man. There have also been a lot of studies done discussing the consequences of *not* educating women. Yet, evidence that a country or family's development has significantly been improved by women's access to education is difficult to measure and requires analysis at both the societal and individual levels.

To fully assess the developmental benefits of women's education, there needs to be a clearer way of measuring its humanitarian impact. The concept of overall welfare contains too many factors to ascribe a method of evaluation. Using too few indicators, such as GDP or number of people employed, raises concerns of deficiency, but too many indicators quickly raises concerns as well. As Jones and Klenow express in their findings on welfare, "leisure, inequality, mortality, morbidity, crime, and the natural environment are just some of the major factors affecting living standards within a country that are incorporated imperfectly, if at all, in GDP" (Jones and Klenow, 2016, p. 2426). It is often unfeasible and inefficient to evaluate so vast of an issue as welfare especially when the interventions are not long term. As one study noted, "relief interventions are often of short duration, capacity and resources are stretched, insecurity may limit access to populations and the space for analysis and research is constrained" (Roberts and Hofmann, 2004, p. 4). There are also ethical considerations in evaluation procedures, namely efforts to protect the dignity and security of those impacted, that can also make it difficult to obtain relevant and needed data.

The evaluation process of development will, especially in relation to the benefits of women's education, always fall short in some way. Each motivation, project, and region vary so

greatly that to ascribe an overarching system of indicators or values seems futile. For example, the values that project implementers use to evaluate impact and the way that people in the region of development define happiness itself raise problematic considerations. However, there still remains a need for some sort of evaluative or substantive way of measuring impact. The nuances of individual humanitarian projects suggest that rather than creating a single and precise model of how to gauge effectiveness of certain development programs, it would be more productive to identify themes each model should contain.

The first theme is the inclusion of input or personal data from the people being impacted by the project. Such micro or participatory data is essential because one cannot really say that a project is effective without the testament and support from the people being targeted by the project. Further, one person can receive positive outcomes from development aid, while another may suffer at its hand. These sorts of nuances are missed when purely macro numbers are analyzed.

Second, the project's end goal should be to remove the donor/donee relationship. Is a project truly effective in helping people if it ends up "becoming the disease of which it pretends to be the cure" (Moyo, 2009, p. 12)? A development project must be directed towards self-sufficiency, free of imposed values or expectations.

Third, the model should contain something measurable that allows for comparisons across projects, whether that be attitudes over time, levels of hunger over time, amount of education received over time, etc. These numbers provide the macro element needed in evaluation. Jones and Klenow actually use a "welfare metric system" that incorporates these themes. They use interviews from individuals in households with quantifiable macro

cross-country analyses in order to produce a more holistic measure of welfare (Jones and Klenow, 2016, p. 2426).

These general themes of development benefits may be applied to the effectiveness of women's access to education. For example, has there been personal data and stories collected indicating positive impact? Are there any indicating negative impact on overall quality of life? How does education improve the lives of women? Are there negative impacts to providing women education in certain communities? Are there underlying intentions other than purely educating a woman and what sort of curriculum is taught? Finally, what broader, quantitative numbers support this qualitative data?

Example Projects

The first organization discussed is Compassion International. Compassion International emphasizes their distinctive use of a direct sponsorship program- meaning a donor, usually from the U.S. gives regular payments to sponsor a child in Kenya. The money can be used for medical care, food, for a child to stay in school, or “most important, opportunities to hear the gospel” (“Sponsor a Child - Compassion International,” n.d.). They explain how the relationship that develops between the sponsor and the child is very personal. On their homepage they state, “when you sponsor a child in poverty, your sponsored child will be linked directly to you. Your sponsored child will know your name and you will be able to write letters to each other.” Sponsors can even visit “their children.” They claim that “sponsoring a child with Compassion is the most cost-effective way to end extreme poverty,” namely because it “builds self-esteem and self-respect” (“What We Do,” n.d.).

Their focus on a direct sponsorship relationship aims to provide mentorship as a resource and encourage the children to become positive influences in their own communities. One of their mottos is that “changed people inevitably change their circumstances,” which is how they make the connection between raised levels of self-esteem and decreased poverty rates. In this case, effectiveness is evaluated as an individual shift in attitude, which if measured and recorded, satisfies my third proposed theme for evaluation procedures.

However, an important piece to evaluate is the heavy emphasis on Christian based values and education. While Compassion International does not withhold help from any person based off of religious affiliation, the curriculum and mentorship are unabashedly Christian. The second theme of evaluation is a project’s need to point towards self-sufficiency, or disintegration of a donee/donor relationship. While not impossible, shifting the dynamic of the direct relationship between sponsor/child as the child grows up without a sense of expectation or link to the Christian faith would be difficult. In this case, the primary focus of providing a child education/freeing them from poverty is too interwoven with the foremost desire to be a good Christian to say that one desire outweighs the other. “The aim, Kurt Birky, a product-management director with the organization, told [one journalist], was ‘to align a redemptive Christian arc with the theme of economic industriousness... Internally, we have a lot of discussion,’ he said. ‘It’s a big puzzle piece, which ones hit you, which ones do a great job telling a story’” (Frazier, 2015). Their idea is that focusing on systemic causes and solutions is not as effective as helping someone change how they view themselves. While this concept is alluring, figuring out an effective way to measure internal attitudes, and then identifying a specific correlation to a decrease in poverty would be difficult.

Further, analyzing this organization raises important points regarding the content and its being taught to children in schools, especially schools being operated by outsiders. Little research has been done in both the areas of evaluating education content and specifically in direct sponsorship programs. Dr. Wydwick, who later conducted an analysis of Compassion International stated, “Given the number of individuals involved in child sponsorship relationships and the billions of dollars committed to them, it is surprising that almost no research exists that evaluates the impact of these programs” (Wydick, Glewwe, & Rutledge, 2013, pp. 393-436). He focused his research on comparing adult life outcomes of former participants with the outcomes of those who did not participate in the program by measuring the number of years they stayed in school, type of employment, and status as a church or community leader. These findings show that additional resources for children give increased advantage at performing in adulthood over their peers. However, it says nothing in how direct sponsorship programs compare to other forms of development programs, and whether or not the curriculum being taught could be more effective.

Dr. Wydwick’s study included participatory research. “When asked which component of Compassion’s program was most beneficial, the most common answer given by former Compassion beneficiaries was “educational support” (38.5 percent). The second-most common response related to “spiritual or character development” (29.4 percent)” (Ibid). Creating a climate where a recipient of educational aid could separate academics from the overarching value system, and feel free to disengage from the relationship would be problematic. Should there be an ethical line drawn between religiously fueled curriculum in other countries that bear parallels to an almost colonial type of intrusion and a standards-based outreach? The humanitarian sector

cannot and should not exclude religious organizations who, in mostly genuine attempts at solving social issues, use their values as a springboard to reach out to a community. However, there might need to be authentic discussion on a regulation of curriculum that outside organizations teach in different countries.

Dr. Wydwick admittedly reported that “further research is needed to establish a causal link between aspirations and adult life outcomes” (Ibid). However, his research on Compassion International and direct sponsorship programs raises important considerations on “the importance of ‘internal constraints’ to economic development-the importance of aspirations, self-esteem, goals, and reference points” (Ibid). Other research raises this concern as, “traditionally development has focused on the relief of ‘external constraints’, but the ‘internal constraints’ of the poor are even more important. When a belief in self efficacy and aspirations have taken root, the poor learn to develop ways to deal with the external constraints on their own, and these other issues begin to take care of themselves” (Kristof and WuDunn, 2015, p. 126). While I agree with the change in humanitarian focus, other methods of removing ‘internal restraints’ should be considered. Is it necessary to have a mentorship relationship in order to change attitudes? And how are initial attitudes being measured? The idea of direct sponsorship requires a certain level of dependency-a child or individual is linked up with another person because they need the help and support. It inherently alludes to the idea of insufficiency at the level of the individual receiving aid. We must begin on equal footing, especially when bringing in a different curriculum or values system.

The concept of transforming antagonistic behaviors during a child’s development in an attempt to encourage internal transformation has been tried in various other humanitarian

organizations as well. The second organization discussed gives insight into this concept using a different approach.

The Kibera School for Girls and Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO) emphasizes education to young girls (“Home,” 2019). The organization first took roots when Kennedy Odede, a 23-year old social activist and Kenyan began performing street skits depicting rape violence in the slums of Kibera as a young boy. He was deeply impacted by the plight of his sisters and friends, and saw a need to bring attention to their suffering. His passion eventually caught the attention of an aid worker, who facilitated the opportunity for him to study in the United States (Kristof & WuDunn, 2014, pp. 130-139). He and an American student studying in the slums, Jessica, received grant money while in school to open up “the first free primary school for girls in Kibera. Today, they have over 200 students from pre-K to sixth grade, with a second school recently opened in neighboring Mathare” (Cole, 2015).

Their approach is unique in a couple of ways. They explained in a recent interview that they only allow twenty students in each class. They try to take the “take the poorest, brightest girls and give them a top-notch education,” rather than educating a larger percentage of girls in the community (Ibid). Kennedy and Jessica’s aim in doing this is to encourage a certain level of achievement and expectation for the girls within the school. In this way, they are able to focus on transforming ‘internal restraints’ without imposing any sort of external values system. The idea is that they would create a “generation of leaders who can prove that being from Kibera is not a life sentence of poverty” (Ibid). The emphasis is on the ability of the girls to rise to the challenge on their own.

Second, the curriculum is catered to produce quantifiable data in order to prove the efficiency of the school and the girls' ability to compete on a global scale. "Each grade now has 40 students speaking fluent English, and scoring first in the district on government tests for high school" (Ibid). The education and its content is evaluated and emphasized ("Our Impacts," 2019). The teachers are also Kenyan.

Third, the majority of the people in the organization are not outsiders. Kennedy Odede has unique insight into the complex web of life in the slums and the related problems specifically facing that community. As Cole mentioned, "Instead of being seen as needing help from wealthy, far-away places, they're helping themselves and their neighbors" (Cole, 2015). This cultivates an atmosphere where the giver and recipient relationship can effectively dissolve.

SHOFCO meets all three of the themes proposed as essential in effective humanitarian projects. "Since 2010, SHOFCO has annually recorded responses from over 1,000 households in Kibera regarding program utilization and a wide range of indicators including attitudes on gender and family roles, healthcare access, economic indicators, and educational attainment." Annual surveys of SHOFCO members are also conducted ("Monitoring and Evaluation," 2018). This sort of participatory data allows the organization to track impact, specifically in areas such as changed attitudes that are often hard to monitor. They have been able to report "a drastic increase in the number of reported cases of sexual and gender-based violence over the years" and a "decrease in stigma in the community" regarding these issues largely because of their emphasis on participatory and community research efforts (Ibid).

SHOFCO focuses on both the individual and systemic levels, in a holistic approach at targeting barriers to ending poverty. Their efforts specifically highlight the impact on educating

girls in the community. On their website, SHOFCO explains that, “educating a girl in urban slums means she will earn more and invest 90% of earnings in her family, be three times less likely to contract HIV, and have fewer, healthier children who are more likely to reach adulthood” (“Girls Leadership and Education,” 2019). By empowering girls, they envision a community changed status-quo that benefits everybody.

Table One: Theme-Based Evaluation of NGOs

	Compassion International	SHOFCO
Participatory Input/Data	Yes	Yes
Removes Donor/Donee Relationship	No	Yes
Measurable Data Over Time	Yes	Yes

As indicated in the table above, Compassion International’s model satisfactorily uses participatory data in order to improve the implementation of ongoing projects in Kenya. SHOFCO particularly excels in this area as well. However, one area SHOFCO emphasizes that Compassion falls short is in the removal of the giver/receiver relationship. Further, while Compassion does report measurable impacts of long-term success, namely a greater likelihood for participants to become leaders in the community with higher paying jobs, this data mainly comes from a comparative study done by outside scholars, rather than the organization itself. I hesitatingly marked ‘yes’ under this component on the chart, as these findings do little to evidence Compassion’s claim that “sponsoring a child is the most cost-effective way to end

extreme poverty,” because it “builds self-esteem and self-respect” (“What We Do,” n.d.). In order to make this correlation claim, the organization has to measure changed attitudes over time, which is something they fail to do at this time. Nevertheless, Compassion’s focus on emotional and mental attitudes as indicators of growth should not be discounted. Oftentimes, these areas are an overlooked and necessary part of education, but this can and should come in forms other than a direct sponsorship program. SHOFCO provides an alternative approach that while still focusing on personal empowerment/attitude shifts, does so through an emphasis on academic achievement and communal support. As seen from just these two organizations, there are a myriad of approaches and ways to shift attitudes that result in development.

Education as an Indicator of Overall Welfare

Generally speaking, there has been a trend in the humanitarian aid sector that emphasizes preventative measures, such as education, in lieu of simply giving resources and materials. Access to education can be used as a viable indicator of long-lasting welfare, especially when analyzed in respect to other indicators. One good example of this is distributing contraceptives among Kenya’s young women. A study conducted in 2015 illustrated how access to widely available contraceptives did little in preventing mistimed and unwanted pregnancy. The youth were even knowledgeable on how to use the contraceptives, but “myths and misconceptions” ingrained into their social networks and communities deterred them from using the products (Ochacko, 2015, p. 118). The study concluded that “networks provide an opportunity to encourage or discourage use; a way of sharing potentially positive information on contraceptive technologies but also a channel for rumours, which may negatively influence use” (Ibid). The

organization followed this study up with a media campaign and other educational efforts in attempts at influencing the information coming through those networks (Ibid).

This intervention shows how women's access to education can encompass not only organized or primary modes of instruction, but basic access to information that contributes to their well-being. An increase in this sort of education creates a cyclical effect. If a woman has proper education about her reproductive rights and options, the chances of her being able to stay in organized forms of education increases ("More education equals less teen pregnancy and HIV," 2008).² When her level of organized education increases, the chances of a higher personal GDP increases, which in turn allows her better access to family planning resources (Ettarh, 2012, pp. 47-55). Access to family planning resources can benefit the economy and development of the country at large. The increase in education or preventative measures is found to be much more impactful than merely giving resources.

This study raises important points about what education in Kenya might need to encompass. The region is unique in its history, socioeconomic relationships, and cultural beliefs. Rather than introduce a system designed to accommodate learning in the United States, for example, it is helpful to base content and curriculum that can infiltrate the specific web of challenges facing the people, especially women, in Kenya. In a study that tracked education in Kenya through primary and secondary schools, the authors identified some of these barriers. They mentioned that, "The higher cost of education in the unaided schools is a major cause of the higher attrition of girls, followed by sexual harassment, which results in premarital pregnancies, and violence meted out to girls, particularly in mixed secondary schools" (Fatuma,

² "Every year, about 13,000 Kenyan girls drop out of school due to accidental pregnancy.

2006, p. 68). As organizations in Kenya focus on educating girls and women, these barriers have to be accounted for in order for the implementation to be effective.

Educating Boys in Order to Educate Girls

A unique approach to education against sexual harassment and violence focuses on boys instead of girls. It might seem strange to target boys when talking about the importance of educating girls, but this approach holds merit. One organization, “Your Moment of Truth,” teaches a program to teenage boys in school. The classes cover “everything from sex education, to challenging rape myths, consent, and how to intervene if the boys witness an assault taking place” (Donovan, 2018). Mr. Njangiru, the founder notes, that “If we, as boys and men, are part of the problem, then we can be part of the solution” (Ibid). A Stanford study actually researched the impact of this sort of interventionist program and the results were astounding. They found that “following the Your Moment of Truth classes, the percentage of boys who intervened when they witnessed a physical and sexual assault rose from 26% to 74%. Boys were also found to be less likely to endorse myths about sexual assault and the incidence of rape by boyfriends and friends had fallen.”

Even further, “Among female participants in the project, there was a remarkable 51% decrease in the reported incidence of rape” (Odero, 2014, pp. 783-805). If one of the major barriers facing women from receiving education in Kenya is sexual violence, then educational programs like this can contribute to the overall welfare of women in the country and development of the nation as a whole.

Concluding Thoughts and Suggestions

By simply looking at comparisons of personal income or national GDP, one might miss how other factors contributed to the rise or fall of the numbers. There might be additional impacts when women gain access to education that are difficult to quantify, such as a shift in cultural expectations/standards, greater representation in government and decision making, or better emotional and mental health. In order to access this sort of information, personal surveys and interviews are beneficial, but can also fall short in highlighting the full scope of evolving factors.

As culture and expectations change in a society, it is extremely difficult to identify the myriad of ways attitudes and people are impacted. For example, while the introduction of opportunities for education have benefited thousands of women in Kenya, a study based on analysis of the life-stories of four professional female educators, reported that, “although some of the women in the study achieved professional recognition and success, others found it more difficult to reconcile their multiple roles, commitments and career interruptions. Some of them felt psychologically, intellectually, and emotionally drained in their attempt to balance work commitments with parenting commitments (Gatua, 2011, p. 37). A recent study also shows that “many men tend to shun highly educated girls especially where candidacy for marriage is concerned and view highly educated women as rude, uncooperative and unable to manage housework” (Gatua, 2011, p. 99).

A combination of economic and cultural factors has limited girl’s access to education for decades. For example, one pervasive cultural belief in Kenya asserts that education is harmful to women as “it destroys morals, traditional values, and norms” (Karani, 1987, p. 425).

Implementation of education must include information that will target ‘external restraints’, such as systemic barriers and attitudes Kenyan women face in the pursuit of education.

The education provided must also concurrently target ‘internal restraints,’ which can really only be understood by those from within the community. There are mentalities that must shift in order for personal and community development to last, but this simply cannot be done by imposing Western values from an outside perspective. Without more regulation of curriculum and the effectiveness of that content, we simply risk perpetrating the colonialist narrative that formulates a never-ending giver, recipient relationship, which only truly benefits one party.

Nongovernmental organizations and relief agencies need to be honest about their intentions and motives in other countries and consistently evaluate the results of their programs. Women’s access to education can become an indicator of welfare, but it will need to encompass more than building schools and sending young Americans to teach girls English. The programs need to support growth at both the personal and organizational levels, which will require participatory input. Results will need to be measurable and then reproduced elsewhere, and Kenyans will need to be treated like self-sufficient, equal partners in the effort, rather than second-tier human beings who are “less developed.” If we fail to improve the ways that we give, we risk becoming another cog in the systemic wheel of issues facing the development of Kenya.

Word Count: 4605

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Taking Off the Nametag: Why Some Returned Missionaries Leave the Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter Day Saints for Good

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Background

One of the iconic images of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is two young men, in suits and ties, riding bikes and knocking on doors. Most people recognize them as eager and faithful, though others might use words like brainwashed and overbearing. However, few people would ever associate missionaries with terms like skeptical or unconvinced.

Nevertheless, there are a large number of missionaries within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that fall into this latter category at some point in their lives. Some go through faith crises before they embark on missions, some during their missions, and some upon returning home from a mission.

While some missionaries, former and present, choose to hold on to their faith despite disbelief or challenges, others let go of the faith they once spent years teaching. This paper looks at exploring the reasoning behind this shift, or in some cases, whether or not there is a shift from belief to disbelief at all. Every individual case will be unique in all of its driving factors, but there will likely be commonalities across the board. This paper seeks for these individuals' voices to be heard, from their own perspective and experience.

Problems, Questions, Significance

Most studies on returned missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints have been initiated by leadership or committees from within the church, which can be problematic as there are certain biases to take into consideration. This study seeks to introduce a new perspective from the eyes of those who experience these faith crises. This will provide important data from the individual's own perspective.

Further, it is difficult to find data on how many returned missionaries leave the church because few go through the full process of membership removal that would erase their records from the Church. Because of this, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has historically refuted the claim that there are a large number of missionaries that leave the faith. For example, one 1979 study published in the Church's magazine, the *Liahona*, concluded that "not only are today's returned missionaries very active—they're also more active than their counterparts forty years ago!"¹ While the conversation about retention has shifted in recent years, especially regarding those who come home early from missions,² it is still difficult to find accurate numbers or statements indicating the status of returned missionaries overall.

This paper will grapple with the question of what it means to "leave" the church, according to the institution and the individual. It will shed light on what kinds of factors motivate missionaries to forgo their practice as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and will analyze whether or not these factors are isolated to the Church, the mission experience, or to religiosity in general.

I believe that the number of returned missionaries who no longer identify as members of the Church is larger than reported and that the dissociation of missionaries with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is often correlated with general rejection of organized religion. I also believe that much of the tension and stigmatization that comes as a result of disassociation with the Church between individuals, families, and communities stems from a deep sense of grief and perceived loss.

¹Orson, Card, "Survey Results Show That a Mission Makes a Big Difference," *Liahona*, 1978. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1978/02/news-of-the-church/survey-results-show-that-a-mission-makes-a-big-difference?lang=eng>.

² *Liahona* Ficquet, "Early-Returned Missionaries: You Aren't Alone," *Liahona*, 2019.

This study is significant in various ways. First, there have been few studies conducted on missionaries within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, though this is a field that is growing. This project will provide additional data and perspective to the research initiated by church leadership and other scholars. Second, missionaries who leave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints are sometimes stigmatized or misunderstood by their families or others who remain within the faith community. This study will allow individuals to share their identity and stories in a way that seeks to promote understanding and acceptance from both within and without the church. Third, it will suggest areas for further research associated with the missionary experience, including gender, cultural experience, and other sociological factors. While this study does not seek to explore these areas specifically, other scholars could pursue subsequent research as a result of this study. Fourth, if the number of returned missionaries leaving the Church is growing, then their departure could be causing changes within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This study will help to illustrate how factors that cause returned missionaries to leave the Church might be causing leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to rethink and redevelop policies. Fifth, this study raises important questions about membership numbers within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and how this data is gathered and reported.

Intro

In 1979, Elder Carlos E. Asay of the First Quorum of the Seventy, executive director of the Missionary Department, explained that for “some time stories have persisted in the Church

claiming that a high percentage of returned missionaries become inactive.”³ That was about forty years ago, yet these stories still continue.⁴ In fact, returned missionaries and their resulting activity status are still discussed in meetinghouses, conversations between church members, at mission reunions, and on popular Reddit pages.⁵ It remains so popular of a topic that studies have been done at the Church-affiliated school BYU to get to the bottom of the seemingly widespread crisis of faith. Where do these stories stem from and why are they still prevalent amongst Latter-day Saint communities today?

Most people would assume that when an individual serves a mission, they are committed to the doctrines and principles that they will soon spend years teaching. Why else would they give up a year and half or two years of prime youthhood to focus on spirituality, rather than go to college, date, and participate in all of the typical young adult activities that happen in the early twenties? However, this is not the case for many young people that serve on missions. For some, they may be completely dedicated to the purpose of the mission, with a real desire to teach people the truths they hold close. Contrastingly, for others, the primary reason for serving a mission stems from what they describe as “family and societal pressures”-a certain level of expectation to serve. Many individuals that I interviewed expressed a loss at what to do at all in their life at that point. The mission represented an opportunity to simply leave home, while appeasing the apparent expectations of those around them. And still, for others, it was a last shot

³ Card, “Survey Results,” 1978.

⁴ For example, one user on a Yahoo answers board, questioned: “Mormon Missionaries going Inactive?” in 2013. Refer to <https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20130701140340AA8Liok>.

⁵ Returned missionaries are very prominent on ex-mormon discussion boards, but there’s no way of counting them. Refer to <https://www.reddit.com/r/exmormon/>.

at giving an already wavering faith one last chance. They reasoned that if they were truly going to find out whether or not the Church was true, the answers would come while serving a mission.

All these reasons aside, the missionaries enter a training center where the journey begins. For some, this is in Provo, Utah, and for others it is in one of the training centers abroad. Mental frameworks and emotional attachments begin to shift as the youth learn what it means to be ‘a missionary.’ They are placed in ‘districts’, which are groups of missionaries going to the same location or region. Upon completion of training, they leave the center and travel to destinations across the United States, and for some, across the world.

The mission experience is fundamentally similar in nature. Individuals are paired up with a ‘companion,’ go through a training period, follow the same handbook of rules and expectations, follow a similar schedule of study and teaching, and operate underneath the same hierarchical leadership structure. However, the ability to categorize and compare the mission experience quickly falls short when looking at the individual, participatory experience.

As discussed earlier, individuals enter the mission experience for different reasons, and often a combination of reasons. This can impact the attitudes and experiences of missionaries as they interact and engage in dialogue with other people and missionaries. For one missionary, serving with a specific ‘companion’ or mission president might be a contributor to a loss of faith, as they don’t see eye to eye on doctrinal issues. For another, serving with the same companion or mission president might encourage increased faith and desire to remain a member of the Church. Further, individuals bring their own set of experiences into the mission field. For some, they grow up in areas where their faith is the majority. For others, being a member of the Church was a minority experience. Some grow up in families that attend church together, while others come

from mixed faith or no faith backgrounds. All of these factors are part of the faith experience and have to be considered when evaluating the effect of a mission on overall faith.

Further, there are other factors of the mission experience to take into account, such as interaction with diverse thought or belief, culture shock, rate of rejection, mental, emotional, and physical illnesses, attitudes toward gender, or living conditions. More needs to be done in studying the impact of the mission experience itself on resulting loss or conviction of faith, as patterns from the mission experience will only be highlighted in individuals' stories in this study.

Once the mission is complete, every missionary goes through a transition period. Oftentimes, there is a shift as the missionary renavigates their identity. No longer a missionary, but no longer the person they were before leaving on a mission, there is a certain level of identity reconciliation that has to be done. The missionary goes from being part of a group or community and there is often a level of loss that is experienced when this is taken away. Some seek that community in other places. Other individuals come home to new or reoccurring family tensions, additional family members, or a completely new location as the family relocated while they were gone. The missionary might feel unfulfilled, hold higher expectations of themselves, or want to spend time doing anything unrelated to Church. They might be eager to begin dating, going to school, or getting a job. Others might be completely terrified of these things. Some missionaries look back at a year and a half or two years as the best time of their lives, while others might look back on a four or five month mission that ended unexpectedly and instead, only feel failure and hurt.

Understanding the complexity of each individual's experience prior to serving a mission, during the mission, and after the mission is essential. While there might be some overarching

patterns or factors that contribute to an individual's decision to disassociate with the Church, the rich pluralism of the individual experience shows the risk in generalizing the very personal nature of the mission experience in relation to faith commitments.

The Terms we Use

I choose to use the word disassociate because there are problems with using words “active” and “inactive” in the LDS context. Denoting an individual as “active” overlooks many other factors that determine how a person relates to the religion. In order to be an “active” member of the LDS Church, it is generally expected that a person attends church at least once a month⁶. Someone who does not participate in church activities, but has not had their name removed from church membership records would be considered “inactive” or “less active.” While these terms might help members and leadership when discussing various topics, they do little in the way of actually identifying where a person is at on their spiritual journey and relationship with the Church. There are many circumstances that require adaptation to the boundaries that the terms set, and when the church uses these terms in making factual statements about retention, it can be problematic.

For example, while serving an LDS mission in Russia, I often met with a woman who had been baptized a member during the 1990s. She held strong beliefs about Jesus Christ, about the truthfulness of the LDS Church, and absolutely loved to pay tithing. She believed in the Book of Mormon and read it, along with other church magazines consistently. However, she did not attend church. She simply felt that she lived too far away to get to the meetinghouse on Sundays and did not particularly enjoy attending. She was considered “inactive.”

⁶ Refer to discussion about the term on <https://tech.churchofjesuschrist.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=8562>.

Now, contrast this example with a close friend of mine in Utah. He also served an LDS mission, but his was in Brazil. Upon returning home from his mission, he began to recognize some deeply held doubts within himself, but was still married in the LDS temple. He went to church because he knew that his wife wanted him there and allowed her to pay tithing on their income. He did not do his own scripture study and began to drink alcohol occasionally, which disqualified him for a temple recommend. However, because he continued sitting in church with his wife on Sundays, he was considered “active.”

Jana Riess calls upon the variety of membership experience in her book, “Next Mormons.” In it, she discusses how Millennial practice and understanding of religion is evolving and how members of the Church are not immune. She reports, “a quietly rising tide of disaffiliation within the LDS Church...in 2007, 70 percent of respondents who had been in the LDS Church in childhood still self-identified as Mormons as adults..but in 2014 that figure..among Millenials..was 62 percent.” However, as Riess remarks, “this does not gauge how often they attend or how ‘active’ they consider themselves to be, only that they claim the label “Mormon” or “LDS” when asked their religion.”⁷ Consequently, when the Church or others make statements about the activity status and retention of members, it is important to consider the limitations of the terms that are used.

The Problem with Numbers

It is difficult to find data on how many returned missionaries leave the Church because few go through the full process of membership removal that would erase their records from

⁷ Jana Riess. *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*. Oxford University Press, 2019, 4-5.

church databases. However, the number is likely larger than reported and there are various factors that contribute to this phenomenon.

Brooks mentions this problem in his book, *“Disenchanted Lives”* when he says, “gathering accurate data on the actual number of apostates from Mormonism is nearly impossible.”⁸ While the Church annually announces the number of church members on the records, it does not publicly disclose the number of people leaving. Further, the church does not consider “inactive” members to be fully disaffiliated with the Church. Individuals often decide not to remove their names from the membership records, which creates a degree of error in reporting that is hard to ignore.

On an individual level, a returned missionary might disengage with the LDS Church, but decide not to go through the sometimes arduous process of getting their name removed from the official records of the Church. There are a myriad of reasons that an individual might decide to keep their name on the official records of the church, including but not limited to, social stigmatization from family members or community, the possibility of a continued belief, or I would argue most common, no real desire or care to fully disengage in this way. As one young man I interviewed put it, “I’ve thought about getting my name removed, but there’s no point. I just don’t see the point in putting in the effort.”⁹ For some, removing their name from the record is as simple as speaking with a leader in their local church building, but for others, the process is long and difficult. In fact, there is a nonprofit designed specifically to assist individuals

⁸ Edward Marshall Brooks. *Disenchanted lives: Apostasy and Ex-Mormonism Among the Latter-day Saints*. PhD diss., Rutgers University-Graduate School-New Brunswick, 2015, 18.

⁹ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview, Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

attempting to get their names removed from the membership records of the LDS church.¹⁰ One woman I interviewed used the legal assistance offered by this website and remarked, “It took about 6 months. [The Church] originally fought back about taking our daughter’s name off of the record because she was born into it..it’s only become more difficult since then.”¹¹ There is a high likelihood that the LDS Church’s official, public membership records contain a large margin of error because of this discrepancy. While this problem is not unique to the LDS church specifically, it is important to consider the way numbers are reported.

Another point to consider when talking about religious disaffiliation and church membership records is the fluidity of the individual faith journey. Some church leaders and studies argue that even if a returned missionary disaffiliates or becomes “inactive” for a period of time, there is a very small percentage that remain inactive indefinitely. One of the most comprehensive studies done by scholars from the Church-affiliated university, BYU, states that, “Although it is unfortunate that any returned missionary falls into inactivity, the fact that almost nine out of ten returned missionaries continue to regularly attend Church up to seventeen years after their missions is remarkable.”¹² From this statement and other interviews conducted, it is clear that activity status that is seen as fluid makes it difficult to confirm or refute a loss of returned missionaries as church members. From the Church’s perspective, a returned missionary might just “fall into inactivity” for a period of time and eventually return, so unless the individual removes their name from the records, there is no need to count the individual as

¹⁰ Quit Mormon Legal Assistance. "Ready to Leave the Mormon Church," Accessed February 2, 2020. <https://quitmormon.com/>

¹¹ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview, Las Vegas, NV, March 1, 2020.

¹² Richard J. McClendon, and Bruce A. Chadwick. "Latter-day Saint Returned Missionaries in the United States: A Survey on Religious Activity and Postmission Adjustment." *Brigham Young University Studies* 43, no. 2 (2004): 22.

disaffiliated with the Church. The only real indicator of disaffiliation then, is a request for membership name removal, which as discussed earlier, can be problematic.

There are several problems with this study, but only a few will be highlighted in order to shed light on potential discrepancies within research on this topic. It was completed in 2004, but the surveys were conducted beginning in 1999. Two decades of historical changes in both the world and the Church warrant the need for additional data regarding this question. There are a vast number of external factors that can influence a person's decision making process, including but not limited to, societal trends in religious identification, location of residence, family composition and environment, sexuality, gender constructions, access to information, policy decisions, and media outlets. It would be nearly impossible to produce studies that isolate one variable as either affecting or not affecting a group of individuals.

Further, the sample size of 5,000 returned missionaries, while substantial, likely attracted a specific demographic of individuals, few of which held substantially adverse feelings towards the Church. Oftentimes, returned missionaries who leave the Church struggle to fully disengage from the culture and identity once held as a member of the Church. The likelihood of one of these individuals reaching out to participate in a survey on religiosity conducted by people affiliated with the faith that they are trying to leave behind, needs to be accounted for.

Regardless of the issues presented in this study, more recent findings by BYU and other institutions point to a significant shift in the activity status of various cohorts of returned

missionaries. For example, one 2015 BYU survey of early-returned missionaries, reported “47 percent are not as active in the Church after returning home.”¹³

“Leaving” the Church

When a person chooses to disaffiliate with the Church, remaining church and family members often only see the external actions of departure. The person stops attending church on Sunday, they might begin to dress or talk differently, or they might stop paying tithing. These are the sorts of indicators that are recorded and that are measurable. However, the process of disaffiliation with a faith tradition that is integrated into almost every element of a person’s life demands deeper consideration, especially when that person is a returned missionary.

Most often, the transition from membership to disaffiliation is not a linear journey. It is a reconciling of identity—a unique process of holding on and letting go of parts of the self. It is a “recursive process of negotiating both intimacy and estrangement from that which has been rejected.”¹⁴ Brooks highlights in his book that even when individuals decide to “leave” the Church intellectually, parts of them have a difficult time actually leaving. He raises the question, “What might it mean to have a mind intellectually opposed to one’s former faith, but live with a body that somatically “remembers” rejected beliefs, practices, and morals?”¹⁵ Can a person ever actually “leave” a Church that they spent months and years teaching others about?

I have noticed this to be true in the interviews that I have conducted with returned missionaries. Many fluctuated between belief and disbelief, as well as commitment and

¹³ Kristine J. Doty, S. Zachary Bullock, Harmony Packer, Russell T. Warner, James Westwood, Thomas Ash, and Heather Hirsch. "Return with trauma: Understanding the experiences of early returned missionaries." *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* 37, no. 1 (2015): 9, 42.

¹⁴ Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives*, 15.

¹⁵ Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives*, 20.

disengagement at different periods before deciding to completely dissociate. This includes negotiating previously held truths and frameworks of life, sexuality, culture, and relationships, among other factors. In one interview, the person said:

“I felt like I knew nothing and everything. This thing I put so much hope and faith in came crashing down. It absolutely shaped the relationships that I had. I had a plan. My whole social life was my husband, my daughter, and the Church. And then I had nothing.”

Expectations

Many of the individuals that I interviewed mentioned feeling a certain level of perceived pressure as a returned missionary, from friends, the Church community, and family members. Some of these individuals ultimately chose to disassociate with the Church, while others are still navigating how they orient. One of the main words those who had disassociated with the Church mentioned was “relief” or “liberation.” As one individual mentioned, *“It was liberating for me to finally be honest with myself and others.”*¹⁶ After years of fluctuating between belief and disbelief, attachment and detachment, the feeling of having to fight for what seemed like an abstract form of relief gave way to the satisfaction of no longer having to fight.

As the individual that I interviewed reflected on her experiences, she said, *“I had to realize that the Church was not helping me. I had to find a different way to help myself.”* This conclusion came as a result of heartbreaking experiences before the mission, including sexual assault by a church leader that was brushed off as a young girl “being dramatic”, and then experiences on the mission with suicidal thoughts and the advice to “just rely on the atonement”

¹⁶ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

by a therapist. She remarked, *“I was doing all of the things that I was supposed to be doing, but I didn’t feel Christ or Jesus’ presence. At the end of the day, it was a facade and I was trying to please everybody.”*¹⁷ After returning home from her mission, she “felt like a failure” for only serving a mission for four months, rather than the intended year and a half.

While this individual no longer identifies as a member of the Church, there were other interviewees who also mentioned perceived expectations getting in the way of how they identify in relation to the Church. When I asked one of these individuals whether or not they consider themselves a member of the Church, he remarked, *“I don’t know if I consider myself a member of the Church because a big part of that is the Joseph Smith story and the Book of Mormon, which are things that I have a hard time believing in.”*¹⁸ He further explained that while serving a mission, his testimony of other aspects of church teachings strengthened, but he avoided teaching about Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon because he wasn’t sure how he felt about it. Because of these differences, he does not feel like there is a space for him within the Church. However, he does not necessarily feel like he belongs outside of it altogether either.

Another returned missionary, does not consider himself ‘active’ though he occasionally attends church meetings with friends. After returning home from a mission, he started to do a lot of things that he labelled as “wrong” and felt “too impure” to go back to church fully.¹⁹ While feelings of expectation, religious or otherwise, are self imposing to a degree, there are certain external levels of expectation that returned missionaries face in comparison with the general church population.

¹⁷ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

¹⁸ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

¹⁹ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Millville, UT, January 22, 2020.

Returned missionaries are cherished by family members and ward families who marvel as they witness the sacrifice of the Church's youth. Experiences are celebrated in letters, phone calls home, and communally upon speaking at Church when returning home. Further, there is a level of admiration and special bond that can occur between church members/potential church members and the missionaries in their area. This is only amplified when the missionary is a young foreigner who represents a different culture and way of life. The missionary is almost elevated; though just a young person, they represent an ideal, an expression of godliness. One speaker alluded to this as he shared his own thoughts at a general conference. He remarked, "Thank you, Elder. Thank you for what has happened in our lives because of your testimony. You prepared the way of the Lord."²⁰

Even further, another general conference speaker, speaking of returned missionaries, stated, "You have now become a man or a woman, and you are an example to young people in your family, in your ward, and in your community. This will be true whether you want it to be so or not. You are an adult and the childish things must be put away."²¹ Therefore, the way that we talk about returned missionaries and the mission experience matters. Expectations are already felt by most, if not all, returned missionaries internally and these are only amplified by external expectations from others.

"Leaving" the Community

²⁰ Charles Didier, "Letter to a Returned Missionary," *General Conference*, October 1977. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1977/10/letter-to-a-retained-missionary?lang=eng>

²¹ Lowell Durham Jr., "Return of the Missionary," *General Conference*, June 1973. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/1973/06/return-of-the-missionary?lang=eng>

As a returned missionary, you become intimately aware of what it looks like to be “inactive” to other members of the Church. As one girl I interviewed mentioned, “I’ve been in those meetings where we talk about reactivating people...I know that my dad stands at the pulpit, talking about his ‘wayward daughter.’” When I began the interview with her, she mentioned that as she and her husband affirmed their initial desire to leave the Church, they tried to reconcile staying a part of the community while intellectually disagreeing with the teachings because of the stigmatization they felt would occur. They decided to keep going to their parent’s ward, but made the decision to let go of their callings. However, the mental dissonance eventually became too difficult and they began to distance themselves in other ways. She says that the hardest part about leaving the Church is being given the space to actually leave. She describes the difficulty in maintaining a respectful relationship with her family as she disagrees with what they believe in. She says, “*Our families still invite us to come to things. Just today, my mom mentioned that she wanted to take [my daughter] to church and I had to tell her no. My relationship with my parents has changed drastically because of all this.*”²²

Continuing family tensions and hopes that a son, daughter, spouse, or friend will eventually return to the Church make it difficult for those that leave the Church to fully disaffiliate. As one person I interviewed said, “*someone else is grieving me not being there.*”²³ The pain and hurt never fully goes away; residual emotion is left behind.

Misunderstandings and Grief within the Church

Returned missionaries who leave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints are sometimes stigmatized or misunderstood by their families or others who remain within the faith

²² Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, March 1, 2020.

²³ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Provo, UT, January 20, 2020.

community. This often comes as those that stay behind navigate their own faith commitments and reconcile their own relationship to the person that is leaving. The person who leaves the Church is not the only one who experiences changes and has to reconcile how their previous and future relationships will interact.

That being said, there are some harmful narratives that exist within the community of the Church that “unknowingly create conditions of social alienation and marginality for people leaving the Church.” Brooks argues that church members do so to “maintain projective fantasies and as a defense against the existential threat [those leaving] pose to the community of the faithful.”²⁴ While Brooks findings might be true, he overlooks the possible stigmatization of those who remain members of the Church. Oftentimes, those who remain faithful in the Church are seen as naive, judgmental, or brainwashed by those who leave the Church. This might occur as a returned missionary discovers uncomfortable information regarding early church history or practices and feels the need for family members to be enlightened. However, this advance comes across to still practicing family members as an attempt to destroy their faith. Further, the individual who remains a member of the Church might hold beliefs about the moral and temporal consequences of that family member or friend’s choice to disaffiliate. Their concern could be motivated by real concern or love for the individual who dishearteningly leaves, but this might not translate to the individual leaving. As one person I interviewed said, “*no one actually ever wants to know why we left-they just want to know so that they can convince us that we’re wrong.*”²⁵ Real divisions are created, usually by both parties, neither of which wishes to be misunderstood for the decisions they are making regarding the Church.

²⁴ Brooks, *Disenchanted Lives*, 22.

²⁵ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, March 1, 2020.

Leaving Religion Altogether

One of the most interesting patterns that exist within returned missionaries that leave the Church is the rejection of religion altogether. One would assume that a deeply held belief in God and the transcendent is what motivated the young person to serve a mission in the first place. However, when missionaries disaffiliate with the Church, they rarely find a different congregation or community to practice those foundational beliefs. This first came to my attention as I sat in the office of a currently serving Army chaplain in Fort Douglas, Utah. The individual that I was meeting with belonged to a different faith tradition than the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and had recently relocated to Utah for work. Due to his work as an Army chaplain, he interacts with Soldiers and often engages in dialogue revolving around religious orientation. As we finished our conversation, he mentioned that he had met “many young men who served missions for the Church” but “left Jesus behind all together when they came home,” and he wanted to know why.

As mentioned earlier, the desire to serve a mission does not always come from a strongly held belief that others need to know about God or the gospel. This might be confusing to those that are not members of the Church, as missionaries are generally assumed to be convicted and dedicated purely to the cause of spreading that knowledge. Nevertheless, there are a vast number of reasons that an individual might serve a mission, in conjunction with, or apart from, a sincere desire to teach people about the faith.

For example, one young woman I interviewed did not firmly believe in church teachings before embarking on a mission, but made a promise to herself to serve at the age of nine or ten. This desire was motivated by her parents’ recollections of their own missions and the excitement

of an experience abroad. Events on her mission led her to wrestle with personal perception of God and what she had been taught in the Church. In this case, events on her mission and time to contemplate her spirituality, resulted in her decision to leave religion behind completely upon returning home.²⁶

Another individual that I interviewed shed light on another reason returned missionaries might leave religion behind altogether. As she reflected on her disassociation, she remarked, *“I realized that nothing could be true if the Church wasn’t true.”* She described how her spouse struggled with parts of the Church before leaving on his own mission, but “still believed in everything.” The mission experience was difficult for him in some ways, but it wasn’t until a couple of years after returning home from the mission that his initial struggles with the Church grew. He was sitting in a Church Institute class in which the teacher made fun of educated people who believed in “evolution or psychology.” In that moment, he realized that he couldn’t remain a member of a church who claimed ultimate truth, but denied others. However, he didn’t feel like he could just transfer his membership to another church that affirmed the truths of evolution because he had been taught that “everything else had a piece, but that was it.” As I asked her about her own orientation to religion, she said, *“I’m never going to count on anything fully again.”*²⁷

However, it wasn’t until a recent conversation with a still practicing, returned missionary that I began to see why individuals that leave the Church might leave behind religion altogether. Myself and this individual had engaged in a conversation about ambiguity within scriptural texts and histories. He mentioned that the existence of multiple interpretations of scripture are what

²⁶ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Logan, UT, February 8, 2020.

²⁷ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, March 1, 2020.

have resulted in multiple churches and ideas of truth and that there is comfort in having a single, specific way ordained of God or the sure knowledge of “one right way to believe in.” He explained that when he looks at other faithful members of different churches, he can’t help but think that they’re doing the best that they can with what they have, but they’re still wrong. And that he can’t help but think of all the blessings that they are missing out on because they don’t have the “true gospel.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ exclusive truth claim that it is the only Church with the “fullness of truth on the earth” makes it difficult for any person leaving the Church to want to join any other church. Further, the Church believes that it is ultimately headed by Jesus Christ himself; it claims sole authority to establish His gospel and kingdom on earth. Ultimately, when a returned missionary decides to disaffiliate with the Church, I believe they often disaffiliate with Jesus altogether because of this concept.

Interaction with Diversity

This idea pervaded many of the interviews that I conducted. Most respondents now identify as “spiritual, but not religious” or “hopefully agnostic.” The common thread was an understanding that no one church could be true. As one woman mentioned, *“I know there’s a spiritual being there. For me, it’s just not through the Church.”*²⁸ Another remarked, *“I find it weird that people discredit other religions when you see miracles that happen in other religions too. I’ve heard stories of people in Buddhism that have healing done by people within their own religion.”*²⁹ This idea supports the overall trend of young people that Jana Riess discusses in her

²⁸ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview, Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

²⁹ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

book the “The Next Mormons.” There is a detachment from organized religion³⁰ and a desire to attach to an overarching, universal sort of belief in the transcendent.

I believe that part of the reason for this shift is the introduction of diversity or different ways of life before unknown to the individual. It can seem confusing to a missionary to preach that there is one true way to happiness in life and have so many people reject it. It can be easy to see how it would cause the individual to question their own faith and its universal application. As one young man said, “It gets drilled into you that everybody else is secretly miserable because they’re not in the Church. As a missionary, it’s your job to share the secret to happiness. And I just found that that wasn’t true. There’s lots of happy people with great lives, just trying to do the best they can.”³¹

Truth Claims and Dissent

Many of the individuals that I interviewed mentioned “truth claims” as the main reason for total disaffiliation with the Church. Many of them cited the CES Letter, discrepancies within the history of Joseph Smith, proof against the validity of the Book of Mormon, and disagreements with how the Church theologically approaches LGBTQ issues as sources of discontent. These findings support those found by other Mormon scholars in recent years. For example, in Riess’ book, “The Next Mormons,” she identifies changing social constructions of family and redefined women’s roles as particularly difficult for younger members to reconcile.³²

³⁰ Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 19.

³¹ Andrea Bennett and Kim Fu, “Putting Eternal Salvation in the Hands of 19 year-old Missionaries,” *The Atlantic*, August 20, 2014.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/young-restless-and-preaching-mormon/378760/>

³² Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 4.

I recently participated in an activity during one of my classes that caused me to reflect on the role of discontent within religiosity. We were given twenty minutes of reflection time to answer four questions. First, “What faith tradition or world view do you ascribe to?” Second, “What are some values or core beliefs within that tradition that you find sacred, uplifting, or most fulfilling?” Third, “What are some beliefs or practices that you find uncomfortable or least uplifting?” And Fourth, “What do you want everyone else to know about your tradition-any stereotypes you would like to debunk or overall takeaways you want to share?”

As we went around the room and shared those parts of our traditions that were most meaningful to us, there were many commonalities. This was not surprising to me. However, as we went around the room and shared aspects of our traditions that we struggled with, there were also many commonalities. Most noticeably, there were no individuals who responded by saying that they felt perfectly aligned with every single aspect of their faith tradition. Every person was able to find something that they found concerning, disagreed with, or found uncomfortable, yet they still identified as part of that faith tradition.

This might not sound like that transformative of a revelation, but it is fundamental in understanding the shift many people make when they choose to leave their faith traditions, and the Church in particular. Riess’s findings show that, “less than half of Millennial [Mormons] believe in the whole package of LDS truth claims without any reservations.”³³ No church or religion or worldview is immune to some level of dissatisfaction from its members, but without acknowledgment of these issues by others within the group, the individual can feel isolated in their concerns. Eventually, a shift occurs and that dissatisfaction or list of uncomfortable aspects

³³ Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 18.

of a tradition override the positive elements, and a person disassociates with the main body or group.

Within the LDS Church, this issue is compounded by the narrative that it is the only Church with the fullness of truth on the earth. There is a false sense of infallibility that persists within the culture of the church that makes it difficult to justify finding anything uncomfortable or wrong with the Church. If it's doctrines are the only ones all the way true, then I should not find anything wrong with any of them. If I do, then I'm not being faithful or humble enough and should not honor those doubts or concerns.

While the Church does not teach that dissent or disagreement is sinful or wrong, there are few real avenues to expressing alternate views of theology, practices, or ideas. The structure is set up so that local bishops and stake presidents handle most concerns, but most of the answers are to be found in handbooks that do not always answer the questions. Questions and concerns very rarely get pushed up to levels where real dialogue and changes occur. This can be problematic in that members' concerns can go unheard or unvoiced, and eventually feel like if they have these concerns and no one else does, they should disassociate.

In the experience of one individual I interviewed, the young man had recently returned from a mission during which he often drank green tea with local church leadership, including his mission president. Upon returning home from his mission, he was told by church leadership that he couldn't have a temple recommend if he drank green tea. This inconsistency in practice really concerned him and caused him to begin questioning the teachings of the Church altogether.³⁴

³⁴ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Millville, UT, February 23, 2020.

Another example of this problem comes from the stories of the men and women involved in the Ordain Women Movement. In their book, *Voices for Equality*, they describe the various stages of activism within the organization. Surprisingly, they mentioned multiple attempts at less visible protests before the well known public protest done during the Church's semi-annual conference. They had sent letters, many of which were redirected to local church leaders, and advocated for the chance to speak with various representatives that went unanswered. They argue that there is no real place for the expression of grievances or disagreements within the church. "Even the practice of sustaining functions to reinforce the religious unity, loyalty, and shared commitment values of the Latter-Day Saint community, not to provide a forum for the discussion of disagreements or registration of dissent."³⁵

This is not to say that the leadership of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints knowingly turns a blind eye to any form of discomfort from within the body of the Church. On the contrary, many developments have recently taken place, in what I believe, is an illustration of sincere regard for church members' concerns. These might include changes in the mission field regarding dress or interaction with family members, the shortening of church meetings on Sundays and in temples, or stricter regulations when interacting with youth. While some would argue that these changes are only "divinely" inspired and do not reflect concern from the lower levels of the Church, I would argue that change only comes as there is synergy between momentum from the ranks within, and timely vision from those that head, the Church.

Conclusions

³⁵ Gordon Shepherd, Lavina Fielding Anderson, and Gary Shepherd, eds. *Voices for Equality: Ordain Women and Resurgent Mormon Feminism*. Greg Kofford Books, 2015, 32.

What does it really mean to “leave” the Church? An institution that encompasses millions of people might have to resort to some sort of quantifiable data in determining a person’s membership status. However, can a person’s commitment to a faith tradition really be determined by anyone other than themselves? The individual faith journey and process is so uniquely personal and complex, both for those that stay within the Church and those who choose to leave, that to create an evaluation method that determines activity status is futile. Creating an atmosphere where the faith journey is truly accepted as fluid, whether a person is sitting in church on Sunday or not, will assist in minimizing the divide between those ‘in the Church’ and those ‘outside of it.’

Likewise, the mission experience is similarly personal and unique to the individual. This is not to say that it should not be studied or that patterns do not exist between shared experiences. However, it does argue that there will never be a singular reason to which we can point to for why returned missionaries or even a singular missionary chooses to leave the Church. As I talked with one woman about my husband’s eventual disaffiliation with the Church, she reasoned, “There is always a turning point; a moment that shifted everything.” This idea is tempting to cling onto, especially for those closest to the individual, as they try to reconcile the loss of faith. However, as indicated in the interviews I conducted and in those studies done by others, these stories are not black and white.

The tendency to reason and look at the world through a Manichean lens is part of what creates these divisions. As Riess puts it, “Millenials are less likely to “embrace an all-or nothing theology.”³⁶ While we can point to various factors for missionaries’ disaffiliation including, but

³⁶ Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 18.

not limited to: antigay rhetoric, treatment of women, superannuated leadership,³⁷ doctrinal questions or disagreements, incidents of sexual assault, emotional and mental illness', or the changing religious landscape in America, I believe that there are three overarching patterns that cause returned missionaries to leave the Church, under which many of these reasons can be situated.

First, many returned missionaries leave the Church because of expectations. These expectations might include the need to fit a certain mentality or way of thinking that the majority of Church members seem to agree upon. They might include perceived expectations of adulthood or sense of maturity upon returning home from a mission, which leaves little room for self exploration or identity reconciliation. They might be expectations to feel a certain way about doctrinal principles or to have a specific kind of relationship with the Church or God. They might feel pressure to remain active as brothers and sisters or friends decide to disassociate, in spite of their own doubts and concerns. This coincides with Riess's findings that "many young adults Mormons are intensely loyal to the Church, but they also struggle with whether they will be able to live all the commandments of a strict Mormon lifestyle."³⁸

Second, returned missionaries disassociate because of truth claims. Almost every person that I interviewed referred to difficulties reconciling church teachings or history. It is difficult to say that these findings resulted in a loss of faith, because as one individual I interviewed reported, "*[the truth claims] gave reason to the way that I was already feeling.*"³⁹ However, newfound information about the Church generally aided in the individual's decision to

³⁷ Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 6.

³⁸ Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 9.

³⁹ Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

disassociate. This was combined with a sense of liberation of not having to pretend to “play a role” as one interviewee said. Here, it is visibly apparent how truth claims, doubts, and expectations intersect.

Finally, many returned missionaries disassociate because of their interaction with diversity. This might stem from increasing worldwide diversity, experiences on the mission with different frameworks or beliefs, or even experiences after the mission. This confirms Riess’s findings that it is difficult for the younger generations of the Church to “reconcile the tensions they feel between exclusivist claims and their generation’s generally inclusive, tolerant, and open-minded worldview.”⁴⁰ It is easy to see how it could be difficult to spend years preaching that one way of living and thinking is the right way, while constantly interacting with people who have existed, often happily, without it.

I believe that these three patterns feed into each other to various degrees within individuals’ stories, to eventually result in the choice to disassociate. I also believe that the Church’s attempts at increased transparency and changes in the missionary department will help in combating some of these issues. Further, I propose that the way we talk about faith and truth in the Church needs to change. Church members cannot have a monopoly on happiness or truth. This can be assisted as dialogue between various faith traditions and members of those traditions occurs more frequently. As we enter an increasingly diverse world, being able to navigate and hold onto our own beliefs, while accommodating and appreciating others’ worldviews is imperative, and as proven by Riess and in my studies, vital for the youth of the Church to want to remain members of the Church.

⁴⁰ Riess, *The Next Mormons*, 9.

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Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Millville, Utah, January 22, 2020.

This is a primary source that is used within the project. The individual mentions that he considers himself a member of the Church, but is not necessarily an active participant within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. He mentions that upon returning home from his mission, he felt alone and began to practice behaviors inconsistent with church teachings. This made him feel like he was too unworthy to attend church regularly. This interview is important because it shows the very individual experience of each missionary's faith journey and the ability for religious identification to fluctuate at different points in that journey.

Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Logan, Utah, February 8, 2020.

This is a primary source that is used within the project. The individual mentions that she did not firmly believe in church teachings before embarking on an LDS mission, but made a promise to herself to go on a mission at the age of 9 or 10. This desire was motivated by her parents' recollections of their own missions and the excitement of an experience abroad. Events on her mission led her to wrestle with personal perception of God and what she had been taught in the church. Eventually, she felt abandoned by other missionaries, the church, and God. This interview is interesting because it demonstrates how not every missionary is sure of church teachings before leaving on their mission.

Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Millville, Utah, February 23, 2020.

This is a primary source that is used within the project. The individual traces his disassociation with the church back to experiences on his mission where he felt like he was asked to serve and preach in ways that were not supported by the God that he knew and understood. He also quotes inconsistencies with the execution of church policies and feeling "judged" as primary reasons for leaving the church. This interview is interesting in that the individual claims he is spiritual, but

not religious, yet still goes to church occasionally when his wife asks him to. It shows the implications of church membership records and personal religious identification.

Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, March 1, 2020.

This is a primary source that is used within the project. The individual disassociated with the Church mainly because of truth claims. She read the CES letter and felt betrayed by the Church. She explained the transition and shift in identity that occurred after choosing to disaffiliate and the difficulty of navigating relationships with family and the Church. The individual had her name removed from the records of the Church and her interview was noteworthy in explaining the sometimes difficult process of doing so. She considers herself 'hopefully agnostic' but expressed a deep distrust of institutions, preferring to rely on her own knowledge and reasoning.

Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, March 1, 2020.

This is a primary source that is used within the project. The individual also disassociated mainly because of truth claims. He was aware of controversial information regarding church history before leaving on a mission, but still felt a desire to serve a mission. He had a difficult time on his mission. He felt different from other missionaries and served in some very poor areas of the United States. He mentioned being depressed through most of his two year mission. Upon returning home, while attending a church education class, the teacher made fun of people who believed in evolution and psychology. The interviewee realized he couldn't continue to be part of an organization that refuted science and other truths he held, so he decided to disassociate. He mentioned that his parents felt like failures when he chose to leave the Church and the individual was married in the temple.

Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview. Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

This is a primary source that is used within the project. The individual indicates that they had disassociated with the Church spiritually and emotionally immediately upon returning home from a mission. While they no longer consider themselves a member of the Church, they have not had their records removed. Other points of interest within this individual's story were incidents of sexual assault by church leadership before leaving on a mission, trivialization of mental health issues before, during, and after the mission, as well as an early return home from the mission. The individual cited 'awareness' as the word of choice for the main reason for disassociation. She explained that at first she thought the sexual assault was an isolated case, but after becoming aware of other incidents, she correlated the misuse of priesthood power and a culture where "men feel like they can get away with anything" with the sexual assaults taking place. This took a toll on her faith, but she also states that she felt like she was trying to please everyone for so long, and that part of the awareness was being able to finally be honest with herself and others about the disconnect she was feeling-with the Church, God, and doctrines.

Interview by Dawn Dimick. Personal Interview, Las Vegas, NV, April 6, 2020.

This is a primary source that is used within the project. The individual is currently unsure of how he identifies with religion. A significant part of the reasoning behind the internal conflict is a disbelief or lack of testimony in certain doctrinal concepts, including Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. The individual mentions that he feels like having a belief in those concepts is vital within the faith tradition, so he isn't sure whether or not he can really identify with the teachings and the tradition. He mentioned that his motivation for serving a mission was purely for the experience abroad; he actually prayed to go to Japan and told God that he would not go if he didn't get sent there (and he went to Japan). A particular note of interest in this interview was the individual's existing belief in Christianity and testimony of biblical truths. He stated that he first started learning about other religions while serving a mission and began to wonder why people discredit religious experience. He had incidents on his mission with diversity and different ways of thinking that caused him to question doctrine and the ultimate claim to truth. While he isn't sure where he stands with the Church, he mentioned that he doesn't feel a need to go to church meetings at this time, as religion isn't his priority. He said, "if anything, I'd rather just research on my own right now." The individual is married in the temple.

Riess, Jana. *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

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REFLECTION

I have always been very excited about the capstone experience. Though it seemed daunting, I felt confident in my ability to write, as long as it was on a topic I was genuinely interested in. The capstone reflected the ultimate project or culmination of ideas from all my undergraduate years. It was an opportunity to challenge myself to really think critically and be innovative. Most of the papers that I had written were analyses of already existing opinions or reflections on others' thoughts. For the first time, I really had to propose and craft my own opinion, which proved to be both, more challenging, and rewarding than I anticipated.

The opportunity to do both capstones was extremely rewarding. While I probably could have produced one project that complemented and combined both areas of interests, I felt impressed to dive into two separate topics. Though I had independent topics for both areas of study, there were still correlations that came up in my papers where the two areas intersect. This only confirmed my reasoning in choosing to study both majors in the first place.

Writing these capstones was definitely a process, and one that started quite a while ago. I feel extremely grateful to Dr. Ravi Gupta for his theory and methods preparation class, in which my idea to research religious disaffiliation initially took hold. He taught us the importance of narrowing down and formulating a research question. Even the process of choosing an idea and sticking with it was a learning experience, and one that took almost an entire semester to do. I learned very quickly the danger of too broad of a research question. Interestingly, as I narrowed my focus, I became more aware of what I was actually passionate about. I began to see themes that excited me more than others, which are valuable insights moving forward in my career.

About a year later, I went through this same process with Professor Colin Flint as I tried to decide on a research question for my international studies capstone. Again, I learned the vitality of a succinct, narrow research topic, as I first, completely changed, then fine-tuned my research question to focus on women and education.

Having a solid question was a good starting point and definitely foundational. However, the approaches to research between the two papers were completely different. In one, I planned on including a lot of interview based research and building on studies that had been done previously. In the other, I was analyzing existing research and critiquing where it might fall short. I was also doing both forms of research concurrently, so it quickly became a lot to handle alone.

At first, I resorted to habitual ways of research, namely using google scholar and the search tab on the USU library homepage. I probably wasted hours and days frantically trying to skim through book excerpts, using ctrl-find, and random journal articles, just pulling at random bits and pieces. This did little in helping me stay focused on the research topic I had decided and proved very ineffective. Consequently, I became discouraged and wanted to procrastinate the projects altogether. However, people before me realized the importance of a professor-mentor relationship as part of this process, and Colin appropriately suggested that I approach the librarian about research methods.

Working with the department's librarian, Robert Heaton really blew my mind. I had no idea how to do proper research and I wish I would have utilized his knowledge base four years ago. He showed me how to search in different databases using specific terminology and the best

way to access journals catered to my topic. He also showed me a note taking system as I conducted research that helped narrow my focus and question. Because I was working with such ambiguous topics, like effectiveness, it was imperative that I find searchable terms within a narrower frame. Through my work with Robert, I was able to learn how to do so.

Further, I had to learn how to frame my own ideas in order to complement the information I was pulling from other sources. Colin showed me how to use tables and other methods to elaborate on the ideas that I was insinuating only slightly in my paper. I had to turn my opinions into a stronger thesis, which was just so different of an approach than other papers I had written.

I would finish my meeting with Colin and then scurry down the hall to meet with a different professor, Patrick Mason. We had completely different hurdles to overcome in this project. Professor Mason was new to our university and was not enrolled to be a research advisor in the IRB system. However, he was the best mentor for the project that I was working on, so we established that Bonnie Glass-Coffin would put her name in the IRB system as the professor on the project. Working with both of them, I submitted research proposals through the IRB over ten times. It was an excruciating and extremely thorough process that I had not anticipated. I originally planned on completing this capstone the previous semester so I wasn't trying to do both at the same time, but personal matters interfered and I found myself trying to submit approval for a project a few months before it was due. Notwithstanding, the IRB approved the project in February and I got to work interviewing people for my research.

I thought about meeting with the department librarian for this project as well, but eventually decided against it because the research was unique in some ways. While it still would have been beneficial, a lot of the research I conducted was personal interviews and the existing data that I pulled from was easy to find. I had to come up with an interview template and papers receiving consent from participants. I also had to plan how I would keep information confidential and when I would destroy any documentation. It was a really informative, but painful process. However, it broadened my respect for scholarship and for all of the work that has been done. It will be helpful moving forward as I anticipate doing more research aligned with this methodology.

While the research methods and topics of the papers were removed, there were interesting similarities between the two projects. In both of my papers, there was a pervading theme of complexity. Both of the issues that I explored are not black and white. They deal with ideas of identity, existing narratives, relationships between peoples, and impacts of culture. Writing these papers was informative because it helped me learn how to frame these issues within a certain methodology that breaks the complexity into chewable pieces. Because I'm so passionate about what I wrote about, different, intersecting ideas have been coursing through my head and throughout conversations with peers, family, and anyone else who will listen. Being able to write them down, from a scholastic and evaluative approach, was almost therapeutic for me as I was able to link these ideas, transforming them into a single, independent thesis.

In both of my papers, I ended up proposing an overarching theme-based approach to understanding these issues, rather than a single thesis or reason that can explain every correlation. For example, in my research on returned missionaries, I proposed that there are three

umbrella reasons for why returned missionaries in the Church decide to leave. I used this to explain how there is a tendency to see the world in a Manichean lens, and how a lot of grief occurs for individuals navigating religious/spiritual identity as they try to understand the world through this lens.

The concept for the international studies capstone was similar. I argued three main themes that must be in place as part of an organization's aid model in order for it to be effective. I discussed how culture and individual experience, combined with an organization's background and the way that it interacts with those receiving, all factor into the outcome. It follows that there cannot be a one-size fits all, black and white approach to the way that we give. Again, there was a trend that the solution to complex issues will never be Manichean, and individuals or organizations that try to use this framework will fall short, and often cause harm.

I'm hopeful that the research I completed will be beneficial to the larger academic community. I really enjoyed the process of analysis and propositions moving forward. The process itself was informative, but so were the conclusions that I ended up at. I eventually want to work for a nonprofit, so it was rewarding to analyze evaluation methods and procedures that are already being used. It also built nicely on experiences I had throughout my undergraduate years working at a nonprofit. It is easy to see how my studies in development, though catered to understanding regional development, complement my future work in chaplaincy/counseling as well. A lot of the work I do will be helping individuals develop. Similar to communal development, there is a more effective way to do this, which is a lot of what my paper focused on.

Further, the research I was able to do on religious disaffiliation sparked a passion for theological academic research in an area that is just starting to flourish. I am excited to see where this initial research takes me, as I participate in a virtual research symposium in the fall, and then as I continue onto graduate school. The ideas from both papers confirmed the intersectionality of identity, religion, and culture and it was truly inspiring to synchronize years of thoughts, classes, and passions into substantive research.

Word Count: 1617

BIOGRAPHY

Dawn Dimick came to Utah State University in 2014 declared as a Health Education and Promotion Major. After spending a year and a half in Russia on a church mission, she quickly switched to double majoring in International Studies and Religious Studies, with minors in Russian and Military Science. Her passion for cultures, intersectionality, and development allowed her to study abroad in Latvia as a Project GO applicant through the Department of Defense, and led her to Thailand, France, Italy, and Japan, where she enjoyed engaging with nonprofits, and diving into different cultures and religions. She feels extremely grateful to her family at Somebody's Attic for listening to all of her rants, for giving her so much time off to explore, and for helping her develop into the person and leader she is today. Her work there confirmed a desire to continue working with nonprofits, particularly in the sector of women's rights. Her undergraduate experience was largely shaped by her involvement with the ROTC program and Interfaith Initiative, as well as, wonderful mentors from various departments at USU. She feels blessed to have participated in the Merrill Scholars Program and for the opportunity to mentor other first generation college students through the Aggies First Scholars Program. She was awarded the honor of Distinguished Military Graduate, ranking in the top twenty percent nationwide, which secured her slot as an Active Duty Army Chaplain upon completion of her Masters degree. She hopes to continue academic research and interfaith work as she goes on to Chicago Theological Seminary in the fall, where she will pursue a Masters of Divinity Degree.