

Taking Utah to Africa

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Mormon temple in Johannesburg. [AttributionShare Alike Some rights reserved](#) by [ThisParticularGreg](#)

Earlier generations would have been startled to see a hit Broadway musical on the theme of Mormon missionaries in Africa. *The Book of Mormon* is a popular and critical success, and it has stirred debate about the acceptable limits of religious satire. Lost in the story about this unusual theatrical success has been the reality of Mormon missionary accomplishments around the world.

In fact, when we look at Mormon expansion in Africa itself, one pressing question demands attention: Why is the whole continent not already Mormon? The answer tells us a great deal not just about Mormonism but about the wider story of Western-derived churches and why they succeed or fail in the Global South.

Mormonism has deep roots in southern Africa, where pioneer missionaries were setting up shop as early as 1853. For decades, though, the church's refusal to grant the priesthood to blacks stifled any possible expansion, and that ban was not lifted until 1978. Since then, Mormonism has grown respectably, establishing temples in Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa. Today, there are about 300,000 African Mormon believers. This is a solid record, but nothing spectacular by African standards, where upstart churches easily gain followings in the millions.

This relatively slow growth demands explanation, because Mormon theology seems tailor-made for black Africa, and Mormon evangelism stresses exactly those points

that should theoretically appeal to a mass audience. Aspects of African culture that have caused headaches for European mission churches pose few problems for Mormons. Older churches have struggled to cope with new converts who claim special prophetic gifts and who report visions, healings and angelic visitations. Mormons, on the other hand, fully acknowledge the continuing value of prophecy, and they place healing at the center of their mission.

Nor do Mormons have any difficulty with the strong Old Testament emphasis that commonly drives the African-initiated churches. Mormons accept the continuing relevance of the ancient Hebrew prophets and patriarchs, with all the accompanying stories of kings and holy leaders. And they offer believers a complex Temple ritual, supposedly based on ancient Hebrew practices.

Even as knotty an issue as veneration of ancestors can be fitted easily into Mormon beliefs. The LDS offer of salvation extends fully to generations that have passed beyond this life. African converts are delighted to find that Temple rituals offer the opportunity to baptize for the dead.

In an African context, then, Mormonism looks surprisingly mainstream. Locals are not even slightly surprised to hear that the church is headed by living prophets and apostles. In the words of one Mormon pioneer, Emmanuel Abu Kissi, "In Ghana there are many prophets, so the idea of a prophet wasn't new to me." Another early convert, Billy Johnson, stated that little of what the American missionaries taught was startling.

So to return to the original question: Why has this creed not swept Africa? Partly, the LDS church was hampered by its late start and its long-standing restriction of the priesthood. But other mission churches have boomed despite being handicapped by their early association with racism and imperialism. In a continent with a very young population, events of the 1970s are already ancient history.

One reason above all explains the relative lack of Mormon growth—the church's quite rigid views about enculturation, its refusal to accommodate the gospel to local circumstances—to "go native." This attitude was commonplace in the mission churches a hundred years ago, but it is very rare in modern Africa outside the LDS tradition. LDS converts today join a church in which they worship in buildings designed strictly according to plans created in the United States. Their services use Western-composed music, with no concession to native traditions or local hymnody,

and they use pianos rather than drums. Believers strictly refrain from the swaying, dancing, clapping or ecstatic utterances that are so common in most other African denominations. For church leaders, the goal is to offer a worship experience indistinguishable from that found in Utah. The consequences for Mormon growth are grim in an age when virtually all other churches fully accept the need to worship in familiar local ways.

The Mormon experience offers a powerful lesson on the critical need for enculturation. Not even the most potentially enticing message can gain a hearing unless it is framed in local terms and wears local clothes.