

Afterwords

Editor:

I received the *BYU Studies* special issue on President Kimball (vol. 25, no. 4) with great anticipation but was disappointed to see that both Dennis L. Lythgoe's and Eugene England's articles repeat a common myth existing in Mormondom about recent growth in number of missionaries. In opting to publish these two articles, *BYU Studies* only adds to this general misunderstanding and distortion.

England refers to the April 1974 conference meetings and argues that President Kimball's view of missionary work had a transforming effect upon the Church, claiming that his "sermon helped transform the Church, releasing energies that almost doubled the missionary force in the next eight years, with similar increases in converts, new stakes organized, and total members."¹ England's point is to argue that this remarkable power and influence that President Kimball was able to exert upon the members of the Church could be better understood by analyzing both the content and style of his speeches. In a similar vein, Lythgoe refers to the same meetings and the impact of President Kimball's talks on the General Authorities and then concludes: "President Kimball's tenure saw the fruition of his challenge. The number of full-time missionaries grew from 17,258 in 1973 to approximately 29,265 at the end of 1985, an increase of 70 percent. The number of missions increased by 74 percent, from 108 to 188. The annual number of convert baptisms increased 148 percent, from 79,603 in 1973 to an estimated 197,640 in 1985."²

Both of these authors mistakenly assume that the missionary force grew at

an astounding rate during the Kimball presidency. Unfortunately, the data on which they base their argument is grossly misinterpreted.

The central question to ask is whether, in fact, the missionary force increased at anything approaching unusual rates. To answer this question one must look at Church membership growth and number of full-time missionaries over time to see if the growth rates equal or exceed rates for previous years. If the growth in the missionary force is not impressively larger than earlier growth rates, then one can hardly conclude that the Kimball leadership was responsible for "releasing energies that almost doubled the missionary force" or that his "tenure saw the fruition of his challenges" for more missionaries. Had either of the above authors checked available data on Church and missionary growth, they would have come to very different conclusions. Had any of the reviewers of these two pieces asked hard questions about the data underlying the conclusions they would not have allowed such misinterpretations to be published.

Tables 1 and 2 present a summary of Church growth data from April conference reports and LDS church almanacs from 1925-85. As will be seen from table 1, and as is well known, the Church membership has, in fact, grown at a remarkable rate.³ Since the Second World War, the Church has doubled in membership approximately every fifteen years. One also sees similar increases in convert baptisms and, since the number of full-time missionaries is the best predictor of convert baptisms, a corresponding increase in full-time missionaries. The table also shows the remarkable increase in the birthrate per thousand members

TABLE 1. CHURCH GROWTH STATISTICS
FROM CONFERENCE REPORTS AND CHURCH ALMANACS, 1925-85

	Year Ending	Church Membership	Converts Baptized	Full-time Missionaries	Birthrate Per 1,000
Spencer W. Kimball, 1974-85	1985	5,920,000	197,640	29,265	**
	1984	5,650,000	192,983	27,655	**
	1983	5,400,000	189,419	26,565	24.50
	1982	5,165,000	207,000	26,300	28.10
	1981	4,936,000	224,000	29,700	28.10
	1980	4,638,000	211,000	29,953	28.20
	1979	4,439,000	193,000	29,454	30.00
1963-78 (15 years), membership doubled	1978	4,160,000	152,000	27,669	30.70
	1977	3,966,000	167,939	25,300	31.66
	1976	3,742,749	133,959	25,027*	29.72
	1975	3,572,202	95,412	22,492*	27.79
	1974	3,385,909	69,018	18,109*	26.11
	1973	3,321,556	79,603	17,501*	25.64
	1972	3,227,790	91,237	16,367*	26.43
	1971	3,090,953	83,514	15,205*	28.50
	1970	2,930,810	79,126	14,387*	28.41
David O. McKay, 1951-69	1969	2,807,456	70,010	13,291*	28.18
	1968	2,684,073	64,021	13,028*	27.49
	1967	2,614,340	62,280	13,147	27.55
	1966	2,480,899	68,843	12,621	25.23
1946-62 (15 years), membership doubled	1965	2,395,932	82,455	12,585	27.23
	1964	2,234,916	93,483	11,599	30.14
	1963	2,117,451	105,210	11,782	34.56
	1962	1,965,786	115,834	12,269	33.16
	1961	1,823,661	88,807	11,592	32.20
Age 20 to 19	1960	1,693,180	48,586	9,097	34.62
	1959	1,616,088	33,060	6,968	34.00
	1958	1,555,799	33,330	6,314	35.00
	1957	1,488,314	30,129	6,616	34.92
Baby Boom, 1945-60	1956	1,416,731	25,181	6,829	36.60
	1955	1,357,274	21,669	4,687	37.64
	1954	1,302,240	18,573	3,868	39.46
	1953	1,246,362	16,436	2,742	39.24
	1952	1,189,053	16,813	2,897	39.34
	1951	1,147,157	17,175	5,065	37.81
1830-1945, one million	1950	1,111,314	14,700	5,313	37.34
	1945	979,454	4,957	592	32.10
	1940	862,664	7,877	2,216	31.90
	1935	746,384	7,535	1,775	27.90
	1930	672,488	6,758	2,048	29.70
	1925	613,653	6,373	2,500	32.00

* These data come from LDS church almanacs. The other data come from April conference reports.
** No data reported for these years.

TABLE 2. ANNUAL NUMBER OF MISSIONARIES SET APART, NUMBER OF PRIESTS, AND RATIO OF NUMBER OF MISSIONARIES SET APART TO NUMBER OF PRIESTS, FROM LDS CHURCH ALMANAC DATA

Year Ending	Number of Missionaries set apart (1)	Number of Priests (2)	Ratio (3) [(1)/(2)=(3)]*
1985	19,890	375,000	0.0612
1984	19,720	356,000	0.0634
1983	19,450	335,000	0.0824
1982	18,260	325,000	0.0787
1981	17,800	311,000**	0.0844
1980	16,600	236,000	0.0826
1979	16,590	232,000	0.0882
1978	15,860	211,000	0.0890
1977	14,561	201,000	0.0852
1976	13,928	188,122	0.0846
1975	14,446	178,241	0.0897
1974	9,811	170,867	0.0642
1973	9,471	164,668	0.0640
1972	7,874	160,993	0.0568
1971	8,344	152,886	0.0648
1970	7,590	147,955	0.0623
1969	6,967	138,571	0.0612
1968	7,178	128,851	0.0664
1967	6,475	121,842	0.0604
1966	7,021	113,777	0.0719
1965	7,139	108,119	0.0783
1964	5,886	107,184	0.0684
1963	5,781	97,602	0.0717
1962	5,630	91,218	0.0731
1961	5,793	86,005	0.0805
1960	4,706	80,268	0.0703
1959	2,847	77,017	0.0452
1958	2,778	71,993	0.0464
1957	2,518	66,958	***
1956	2,572	63,046	***
1955	2,414	59,906	***
1954	2,022	***	***
1953	1,750	***	***
1952	872	***	***
1951	1,801	***	***
1950	3,015	***	***
1949	2,363	***	***
1948	2,161	***	***
1947	2,132	***	***
1946	2,297	***	***
1945	400	***	***
1944	427	***	***
1943	261	***	***
1942	629	***	***
1941	1,257	***	***
1940	1,194	***	***

* To account for the priest-missionary age differential, the ratio is created by offsetting three years: for example, the number of missionaries in 1985 (19,890) divided by number of priests in 1982 (325,000).

** Some of the fluctuations in the number of priests reported may be due to different reporting procedures used at different times by the Church. It is not clear why the number of priests increases as much as it does in 1981.

*** No data reported for these years.

that occurred during the baby-boom years. What analysts have not done is to determine how much of the Church growth is due to increased missionary force compared to increased birthrate during the decade and a half following the Second World War. For example, how much of the remarkable increase in absolute numbers of full-time missionaries from 1965 to 1976, when the missionary force was doubling (12,000 to 25,000), was a result of the baby-boom generation coming of mission age, and how much of the growth was due to a greater percentage of young men serving missions? While I cannot list all of the issues in this short letter, I can point to some obvious patterns.

Table 2 presents the number of full-time missionaries set apart annually, the number of priests reported each year, and then a ratio of the two. Since the number of priests functions as a crude control for population changes, any dramatic increase in the ratio over time must be due to an increase in the percentage of the population going on full-time missions. What the ratio shows is that the most remarkable jump in the number of missionaries occurred in the years 1960–65. From 1959 through 1962, the number of missionaries almost doubled (from 6,968 to 12,269), and this increase apparently occurred relatively independent of the growth in number of priest-age young men at that time in the Church. The ratio was .045 in 1959 compared to .081 in 1961 (see table 2). A big part of this increase was likely due to a policy change effected in March 1960 lowering the mission age from twenty to nineteen, accompanied by an increased emphasis on missionary work.

It can be observed from table 2 that during the first five years (1975–79) of the Kimball era the ratio increased to a level slightly higher than it was in the early sixties. In the eighties it declines slightly. This same general pattern is reported in research conducted by the Church Correlation Department's Evaluation Division and published in the *Ensign*.⁴ Figure 1 presents the percentage of priests serving missions from 1940–81 as reported in that research.

The most accurate summary statement implied by these data is that the largest increase in the proportion of LDS members serving full-time missions occurred in the early 1960s and that the proportion has remained relatively stable since then, with some increase during the last half of the seventies.

What the analysts have not done is to identify where the increase in number of missionaries came from during the first five years of the Kimball presidency. My own perception is that when better analysis is done with better data than reported here, the increase in the number of missionaries during the Kimball era will likely be seen to have occurred because of increasing numbers of missionaries other than young men, such as sister missionaries, health missionaries, welfare missionaries, and couples. I am not convinced that there was a significant change in the percentage of priest-age young men deciding to serve full-time missions during the seventies.

Two unfortunate consequences flow from such gross misinterpretation of data and trends. The first is that antagonists of the Church have ready access to material which they can use to dismiss supposedly scholarly work by "true believers" as not worth reading. The second consequence is even more serious. Myths are created which, in effect, attribute to President Kimball something that is not accurate. Given the prophet's remarkable life and his commitment to hard work, Christian service, and gospel scholarship, it is ironic that *BYU Studies* does what he, throughout his presidency, repeatedly reminded people that they should not do: "Don't try to make me something more than I am." Of all journals, *BYU Studies* ought not to be guilty of that error in light of BYU's publicly stated commitment to excellence and President Kimball's towering example of a life committed to gospel excellence.

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FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE OF NINETEEN-YEAR-OLD YOUNG MEN WHO GO ON MISSIONS BEFORE AGE TWENTY-SIX: UNITED STATES AND CANADA, 1940-1981



Notes

¹Eugene England, "A Small and Piercing Voice: The Sermons of Spencer W. Kimball," *Brigham Young University Studies* 25 (Fall 1985): 82-83.

²Dennis L. Lythgoe, "Lengthening Our Stride: The Remarkable Administration of Spencer W. Kimball," *BYU Studies* 25 (Fall 1985): 6-7.

³For a discussion of Church growth, see Rodney Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," *Review of Religious Research* 26 (September 1984): 18-27.

⁴"Key to Strong Young Men: Gospel Commitment in the Home," *Ensign* 14 (December 1984): 66-68.

⁵Edward L. Kimball, "Spencer W. Kimball: A Man of Good Humor," *BYU Studies* 25 (Fall 1985): 62.