

# The Most Dangerous Church in America?

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During the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association gathering that preceded the 1999 General Assembly in Salt Lake City, I had occasion to sneak away from the meetings with a colleague, who was as anxious as I was to indulge his desire to sightsee. We wandered over toward the headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, where we decided to tour the famous Tabernacle and Temple grounds. Our guide was a friendly but naive young woman who led us around the complex, sharing her faith as she showed us the sites. During the course of the tour, we confessed to being Unitarian Universalist ministers and our guide inquired about our pastorates. I explained that I worked for the denomination as a District Executive and that I had a particular interest in growth and extension, terms that seemed foreign to her. After some explanation, she exclaimed, "Oh, you mean missions!" "Yes," I replied a little sheepishly, "I suppose that's right." "Well," she inquired, "would you like to meet someone in our missions office?"

Every prejudice I had about Mormon missionaries began to well up inside me. Being invited to meet with a Mormon missionary on their own turf left me feeling like what lyricist W.S. Gilbert must have had in mind when he once quipped that he felt like a lion in a den of Daniels! But then I thought maybe I could acquire some trade secrets from the mother of all missionary enterprises so, being relatively confident in the depth and security of my own faith, I figured, why not? Our tour guide arranged for me to meet with one of their mission leaders later that same afternoon.

When I arrived at the appointed meeting place, I met a man who looked every bit the stereotypical Mormon missionary. While he was very friendly and unthreatening, I nevertheless felt anxious and defensive. I had nothing to fear, though, since he was clearly looking to make an acquaintance rather than a convert – at least for the moment. After some small talk, he got right to the point. "Sister Eash tells me you're a Unitarian missionary," he said. Visions of Garrison Keillor's character Prudence Alcott began to dance in my head, the fictional Unitarian missionary who went west to convert the Indians to Christianity by means of interpretive dance. "Well, I'm not really a missionary," I said, "I'm a growth and extension consultant." "Whatever," he mumbled, "and what does a 'growth and extension consultant' do?" I explained my work briefly and, after a while he observed, "Sure sounds like missionary work to me!" "Whatever," I echoed and then we started to compare notes in earnest.

I was astonished by how much he already knew about Unitarian Universalists. It was quickly apparent that the Mormons had done their homework when they found out that our band of liberal and unconventional "gentiles" were coming to town for a convention. They had obviously sought to

learn a lot about our history, traditions, theologies, practices and trends. Noting that we Unitarian Universalists seemed to be more successful than mainline denominations at maintaining our numbers, he pointed out that Mormonism is the fastest-growing religion in America, attributing its success to a focus on core values and a genuine, comprehensive concern for people. His comments were more sociological than theological, even though his passion for the missionary enterprise was grounded in his deep and abiding faith. At one point in the conversation he said, "You know, our research suggests that, proportionate to your size, Unitarian Universalist churches attract many more newcomers and visitors than we do." "Is that so?" I asked, trying not to appear as surprised as I was. "Yes, it is," he confirmed. "Your churches are pretty good at getting people through the door but – I'm reluctant to say it – you're lousy at holding on to them once they've arrived!" We discussed possible reasons for this phenomenon -- how the Mormons are far more successful than we are at holding on to their young people, how they offer a wide range of seeker-centred activities to initiate newcomers into their faith, how they help newcomers to become involved in various affinity groups, and how they set high expectations for those who join, challenging them to be generous and responsible with their resources. "If your churches were half as successful at integrating and retaining members as we Mormons are," he concluded, "then Unitarian Universalism would be the most dangerous religion in America!" He smiled and even winked as he said it but I knew deep down that he really meant it. I also had a pretty clear sense that he was not much concerned that we would ever become that great a danger.

I've had occasion to ponder his words many times since then. What a thrilling thought – that we have the potential to be the most dangerous church in America. But why stop there? Why should we not strive to be the most dangerous church in the world? In the past, Unitarians and Universalists were often seen to be dangerous. That's why Calvin had Michael Servetus burned at the stake, and it's why Francis David was left to waste away in the dungeon at Castle Deva. That's why his opponents threw bricks through the windows of John Murray's church in Boston, and it's why Theodore Parker composed his sermons with a loaded revolver on his desk, while giving sanctuary to runaway slaves. That's why Susan B. Anthony was arrested for voting, and it's why Margaret Sanger was the object of ridicule and character assassination. In a world where the most vulgar forms of exploitation infect economics, where racism continues to poison human relations, where the drums of war drown out the songs of peace, and where the dignity of persons is trampled upon by the almost unrestrained march of the powerful and privileged, then those who call for economic equity and racial justice, and those who strive for world community and affirm the dignity of persons, will inevitably be viewed as dangerous. A relevant religion is best embodied in a dangerous denomination. Our end in seeking to grow in numbers and influence is not to enhance church budgets or bolster membership rosters – no, it is to once again become the most dangerous denomination that we can possibly be.