

FACT Case Studies of Congregations Engaging Young Adults **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Herriman, Utah**

By Emily Layton

“God reaches into every part of our lives,” asserts Danielle, a member of the Herriman Young Single Adult Ward of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. (The names of members have been changed to protect their privacy.) The Herriman Young Single Adult (YSA) Ward, located in a suburban Utah community, is a robust gathering place for more than 200 young men and women ages 18–30. In a modern culture where religious beliefs and traditions are often criticized and moral values often mocked, it is worth exploring a congregation where young adults feel connected to God. What draws them to participate with this group?

Demographics and History of Young Single Adult Congregations

This congregation (or “ward”) consists of young, unmarried adults from Herriman, Utah. Herriman is a rapidly growing city of approximately 29,000 predominantly white middle-class residents located 20 miles from Salt Lake City at the southwest edge of the Salt Lake valley. A 2011 survey showed the median resident age for Herriman was 24.7, and according to 2011 U.S. Census data, the estimated median household income was \$77,800. Herriman is 9.1 square miles in area and is primarily a residential community, with a library, a recreation center, a grocery store, several doctors’ offices, and a number of restaurants and small businesses. The city was founded in 1851 by Latter-day Saint (LDS) pioneers, suggesting deep historical roots for the LDS Church in this community. The building where the ward meets is a modern structure, but a historical marker on the property identifies it as the site of the original rock church building erected in 1879. It is one of nearly a dozen LDS meetinghouses in Herriman.

The LDS Church (sometimes called the Mormon Church) divides members into wards based on geographic location (in some areas “branches” are smaller groups of members). Each is presided over by a bishop, usually a married man from the congregation who serves as a lay minister for a few years. Members meet weekly for worship services and also gather regularly for other service and social activities. The LDS Church has approximately 29,014 wards and branches (smaller congregations) worldwide. (2012 General Conference Statistical Report) Wards are aggregated into “stakes,” which are geographical groups of five to 12 wards, similar to a diocese. The LDS Church has 3,004 stakes worldwide, 4 of which are based in Herriman. Stakes are presided over by a stake president, usually a married man who serves as an unpaid lay minister for approximately nine years. Stake members meet together in conferences twice a year for worship and instruction and also participate in service and social activities periodically throughout the year.

Since young, unmarried adults have spiritual and social needs that tend to differ from those of established families, young single adult wards are formed when there are 150 or more young single adults in a locale. Inclusion in these congregations is typically

based on two criteria—age (18 to 30) and marital status (single). According to a Church handbook, “Membership in a young single adult ward is temporary. Leaders help young single adults prepare to return to a conventional ward when they marry or reach age 31.” (Handbook) Membership in young single adult wards is voluntary. Young single adults can choose whether to attend the YSA ward for their area or the conventional ward for their area.

The LDS Church first established young adult congregations in 1968 as student wards in university settings. In 1976 the Church created young single adult wards to meet the needs of young adults who were not students. In 2011 the Church discontinued student wards and reorganized young single adult wards based on geographic boundaries irrespective of student status. The Herriman YSA Ward was created as part of this reorganization. The Herriman YSA Ward is one of roughly 1,177 young single adult wards and branches the LDS Church sponsors, mostly in the western United States. “The focus of Church leaders is to make sure that all young single adults have a place to call home, with the opportunity to serve and have their own spiritual needs met.” (Mormon Newsroom)

As part of this 2011 reorganization, young single adult stakes were also created in areas with a high concentration of young single adults. The introduction of young single adult stakes allowed stake leaders to focus on the unique spiritual and social needs of young adults and to sponsor service and social activities more suited to the needs of these members. The Herriman YSA Ward is part of the Riverton YSA Stake. In areas with fewer LDS young single adults, a young single adult ward is often hosted by a conventional stake and may even be shared by shared by two neighboring conventional stakes. If there are not enough young single adults in an area for a congregation, a young single adult organization within the conventional ward or stake addresses the needs of these members.

Ward Meetings and Observations

The weekly Sunday services for the Herriman YSA Ward are three hours long and begin with a sacrament meeting at 1 p.m. followed by a Sunday School hour and concluding with an hour of instruction during which men attend priesthood meeting and women attend Relief Society meeting. They meet in a large, older, brown-brick building with arched windows and a black-and-white steeple on top. The front of the building has an etched-stone sign designating it as a meetinghouse for the Herriman Ward, Riverton Stake of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The building is surrounded by a large grass lawn, bushes, and large pine and shade trees.

The parking lot was filled on the Sunday of the research visit, and many had to park on the street. In the building one finds programs and blank nametags on a table near the entrance to the chapel. The chapel is in the center-rear of the building, along with a gymnasium that is separated from the chapel by accordion doors that can be opened to accommodate larger crowds.

The chapel was already very full. A young adult woman was playing prelude music on the organ while other young adults were chatting with one another throughout the chapel. About 150 young adults were at the meeting when it began, and six to 10 came in later. There was a fairly equal mix of young adult men and women. The majority were Caucasian, but some individuals were also of various ethnicities. The women wore dresses or skirts and blouses, and most men were in suits or button-up shirts and ties.

The meeting began with a welcome by Bishop Bruce Saunders, the married leader of the ward. He greeted visitors and new members and encouraged all to stay after the meetings that day for a nacho bar and socializing. The congregation then joined in singing an opening hymn, accompanied by the young woman on the organ. The young adult man conducting the music was unsure of his actions, but smiled broadly and made funny eyes at a friend in the audience as he did his best to move his arm in time with the music. He was a manifestation of the comfortable, informal atmosphere of the service. After an opening prayer offered by a young adult member of the ward, Bishop Saunders returned to the pulpit and read the names of new members who had recently moved into the ward. He had them stand—four young adult men and six young adult women—so the other members of the ward could greet them. He struggled to pronounce one of the names and laughed with the congregation and apologized to the young woman when he couldn't quite get it right. He then announced the names of men and women who had been called to serve on different committees in the ward and asked for a sustaining vote from ward members. He was very comfortable and friendly in his interactions with the ward members.

After the business of the ward was concluded, the congregation sang another traditional hymn while three young men prepared the emblems of the sacrament (bread and water), which were then passed to the members of the congregation by several other young men. This part of the service took about 15 minutes and was accompanied by a general spirit of reverence. I noticed a few members engaged with electronic devices, others reading from hymnbooks, and some sitting with their eyes closed in silent prayer or contemplation.

Following the sacrament, the bishop's wife, Holly, addressed the congregation. She asked questions, joked, and laughed with the congregants. Her remarks emphasized all the different relationships in their lives and the need to work at those relationships, sacrifice for those they love, and understand the give-and-take necessary for relationships to prosper. She gave many humorous examples from her own 20 years of marriage and family life and encouraged the members to seek out relationships that make them want to be better people. She also spoke of having a personal relationship with God and of challenging times in her own life when she wondered where her testimony of God had gone. She explained the roles of faith, hope, prayer, and trust in helping her face her own questions. She closed her remarks by expressing how much she and her husband loved being involved with the young adults.

Mrs. Saunders' remarks were followed by another hymn, and then Bishop Saunders addressed the congregation for the remainder of the meeting. He told his personal story

of being diagnosed with cancer shortly after having their first child and buying their first home. He shared the process he went through of seeking after God and finding greater faith in his life, asking all to reflect on how they handle life's challenges. He encouraged all to "prepare for the storms, but live in the sunshine. Love the day you are in." He counseled the members to recognize the hand of God in their lives, to "get up and do," and to figure out what God's plan is for them. He admonished them to avoid drinking, pornography, and premarital sex, saying, "Don't view and do as the world does! If you want to win the race, run it God's way!"

At the conclusion of his remarks, Bishop Saunders invited those attending for the first time to come to a new member meeting and reminded all members about the game night the following evening. The meeting concluded with another congregational hymn and a closing prayer offered by a ward member. It is important to note that this was an atypical sacrament meeting. Though the flow of the meeting is usually the same, speakers for the program are usually members of the congregation selected in advance by the bishop or one of his two counselors.

The Bishop

Following the service, most ward members exited the chapel to attend other meetings. I introduced myself to the bishop and his wife. Holly Saunders is 44 years old, and she and Bishop Bruce Saunders, a 47-year-old general contractor, have been married 20 years and have four children. Mrs. Saunders explained that he bishop had served with the young adults in different capacities for about two and a half years, being called to serve as bishop of this ward six months earlier. She expressed how much she loves attending the ward and being with the young adults there, especially how beautiful it is to hear them sing. As the chapel cleared, the bishop kissed his wife and told her goodbye. We then sat on some pews in the back of the chapel and he told me about his service with the young adults.

He explained that his purpose is not to push dating and marriage, as may be the case in other young single adult wards. He said that though the Church promotes marriage and family, that step will happen when it happens. These men and women face many challenges and he wants them to be spiritually prepared to face those things. He said the ward has lots of activities and social events planned, but that he just supports those things because it is a part of the program. What is most important to him is the spiritual dimension to the work he does.

In response to a question about the challenges the members of his ward face, Saunders said he counsels with many that struggle with addictions, particularly pornography, and involvement in premarital sex. He says that discouragement often leads to those things. He explained that he attends a weekly 12-step addiction recovery program to help him be better able to counsel the men and women who come to him for help. Helping members with these issues is fundamental because living according to the Church's moral standard is a fundamental condition to receive a temple recommend (authorization from a bishop and stake leader) for attending the temple where active

adult members participate in sacred ordinances, make personal covenants with God, and are sealed (united eternally) as families.

The bishop also said that the hardest appointments he has are with young women who express that they are living according to the principles they have been taught and done all they were asked to do and yet the marriage and family they so desperately want has not yet been a choice for them. This concern manifests the centrality of the theological belief in the importance of marriage and the eternal nature of family relationships. He expresses feelings of inadequacy when it comes to counseling these discouraged souls and confesses to praying in these moments that he will know what to say because, “They are Thy daughters first Lord, and there is no easy answer to that question.”

Bishop Saunders said he sometimes spends four or five nights a week in various ward and stake meetings, visits, and interviews or counseling appointments with ward members. His stake leader says he should do less and only give two nights in addition to Sunday meetings, but sometimes the need is greater and he feels he can't turn people away. He said it's a hard balance because many ward members who come for appointments are really struggling. While helping in that way is important, he also wants to have time to reach out to those who are actively participating and not struggling. He said he generally doesn't do personal interviews during Church classes so he can instead attend them and interact with the ward members there. He also goes out one night a week with Mrs. Saunders to visit young adults in their homes.

When asked about the new member meeting, he explained that it is held after sacrament meeting each week in an effort to get to know the new men and women attending the ward. A member of the bishopric (usually one of the bishop's two counselors) attends that meeting and has a two-minute informal interview with each new member to get to know where they are from, how long they plan on attending the ward, and what their six-month goals are. This helps the leadership keep a handle on the changing membership of the ward. He says they currently have 327 members (167 men, 160 women) on record—meaning people who have been baptized as LDS Church members, who live in the ward boundaries, and who have attended the ward before. For the past two years they have had an average of 50 percent attendance at Sunday meetings. He tells me that attendance really depends on school schedules and a variety of other factors, but generally there are 160 to 180 in attendance. Today was a smaller group. Often an overflow area is opened behind the chapel to provide additional seating. Yet even in busy times, many members are unaccounted for. Some of the members on record may have moved away, some attend school other places and only come back occasionally, and some simply choose not to come. Ward missionaries (22 young adults and the bishop's wife) help keep track of these people, but the transient nature of this stage of life is a challenge for leaders.

While we were talking, a young woman walked by the chapel doors. Bishop Saunders called to her by name and asked about her younger sister, a member of the ward who was leaving that week to serve a Church mission for 18 months in Japan. He told her that he would come by their home that evening after his meetings to say goodbye. He

later explained that in the six months since he has been bishop, 10 young adults have received a full-time missionary “call” (a specific assignment issued by the Church after an individual expresses interest to serve and submits required paperwork) to serve full-time missions. Full-time missionaries are different than ward missionaries. While ward missionaries continue with their regular work or schooling and serve in their ward area, full-time missionaries leave their families, friends, work, and school responsibilities and serve full-time in assigned areas throughout the world. Young adult men can serve any time after age 18 and serve for 24 months. Young adult women can serve any time after age 19 and serve for 18 months. Roughly 114 members of the ward have already completed full-time missions, which illustrates that this type of service is often central to the religious experience of young adults in this ward.

I asked Bishop Saunders what meetings and activities he would recommend I attend to get a feel for the ward, and he said the one thing I shouldn’t miss is a monthly testimony meeting (a sacrament meeting in which spontaneous testimony is shared rather than having assigned speakers). He said the energy and testimony of the ward members and the experiences they share are powerful. He said and that the meeting always goes past the scheduled allotment of time. Outside of the regular Sunday meetings, activities greatly vary in type and attendance.

Bishop Saunders seems to be a genuine man who knows the men and women in his ward personally and cares deeply for them and their spiritual welfare. He willingly sacrifices a great deal of time for those he shepherds, especially considering this is a volunteer position and he also has a family and professional career to balance.

Stake Meetings and Observations

The Herriman YSA Ward is part of the Riverton YSA Stake. The stake is composed of 11 YSA wards—10 based on geographic regions and one Tongan ward whose members elect to attend that ward. The stake is housed in the Riverton YSA Stake Center in the Jordan Institute Building and seven other meetinghouses in the surrounding areas.

The stake holds a stake conference twice a year for all members of the 11 wards to attend worship services together. I attended one of these meetings. It was a two-hour meeting held at 1:00 p.m. on a Sunday in place of regular ward meetings. The conference included a service held the previous evening to provide additional inspiration and instruction. Upon entering the building that Sunday I was greeted by an older man in a suit and given a flyer about an upcoming “Young Single Adult Summit.” The meeting was held in a chapel that opened into a gymnasium to accommodate the large crowd. Rows of chairs filled the gymnasium and a stage at the far end. Common areas with couches were also filled with young adults who listened to the meeting as it was broadcast throughout the building. Approximately 950-1000 young adults were in attendance. Most young men were dressed conservatively in suits or collared shirts and ties and young women wore skirts or dresses. However there were also a wide

assortment of personal styles of dress as well as a variety of facial hair, Mohawks, and tattoos.

On the stand were the stake president, his two counselors, and their wives. Each of the men wore a handmade lei provided by members of the Tongan ward. The two-hour meeting, held in English, began with the congregation singing a traditional hymn followed by an opening prayer given by a young adult. The subsequent program included seven speakers. The first speaker was a charismatic 27-year-old young woman from the Herriman YSA ward. Using a very informal tone and eliciting laughter from the crowd, she spoke of her life journey and her deepening understanding of hope. She quoted Church leaders and scriptural stories to illustrate that for her, hope is like glow-in-the-dark stars that they all can hold on to in dark times. The next two speakers were the wives of two members of the stake presidency, who both expressed love for the young adults and gratitude for the opportunity to interact with them. One asserted, "You are a light to the world and to me!" and encouraged them to never give up on their hopes and dreams and to never forget Jesus Christ. The second woman referenced a recent movie, *Oz the Great and Powerful*, and the message that "you are greater than you know." She spoke highly of motherhood and of not running and hiding from challenges but aligning your life with God's will for you. The next speaker, who spoke of Christ as a light in dark times, was followed by a chorus of about 30 young adult men singing an LDS hymn, "Ye Elders of Israel."

Each of the three members of the stake presidency then addressed the group. The first speaker, one of the counselors, spoke candidly of the recent suicide of his nephew and the reality of the many challenges that members of the congregation face. He spoke of having strength, courage, and faith during these challenges and ended with a tender expression of love for the members of the stake. The other counselor began his remarks by showing a video of the personal stories of individuals and families from central Salt Lake City who the stake would be helping with home and yard improvements at an upcoming service project. After the video he spoke of acting in a temporal way just as Jesus Christ would and how to help build Zion. He encouraged the congregation to reach out and serve with greater charity, reminding them that "the pathway to happiness travels through other people." The concluding speaker was the stake president, who spoke of the robust spiritual world and the need for a personal anchor and connection with heaven. He taught the young adults to be vertically aligned with God's will for them and not horizontally aligned with the opinions and values of the world or the culture in which they live. He shared a number of testimonies written for him by young adult men and women in the stake about the scriptures and their power to connect a person with God. He issued a challenge to each member of the stake to read the entire Book of Mormon before they met for the next stake conference in six months. He encouraged them to read it, test it, and seek a personal witness that it is true. He invited them to share their experiences with the leadership and closed by saying, "God loves you—as do we."

After the meeting the young adults helped put away all of the chairs in the gymnasium area. Many mingled and laughed together in the meeting area and in the halls. As

members left they were given reading schedules as a reminder of the challenge issued by the stake president.

Second Ward Meeting Observation

As suggested by the bishop, I later attended a “fast Sunday” meeting with the Herriman YSA Ward. On the first Sunday of each month, LDS Church members are invited to abstain from food and water for two meals as an act of spiritual discipline. They are also asked to donate the cost of those meals as a charitable contribution to help those in need. Sacrament meetings on these fast Sundays are unique in that speakers are not scheduled in advance; instead, anyone who would like to share his or her testimony is invited to do so. When I arrived I immediately noticed that something was different. This time, roughly 180 ward members were present when the meeting began. The back of the chapel was opened into the overflow area.

The first part of the meeting, conducted this time by one of the bishop’s counselors, was very similar to the previous meeting. He announced a devotional meeting and choir practice being held that evening and a “get to know you bingo” activity the following evening. He encouraged the members to check the ward Facebook page for details about the activities. The meeting proceeded with a congregational hymn, an opening prayer, another congregational hymn, and the administration of the sacrament to members. At that point the man conducting the meeting returned to the pulpit and shared brief remarks about the scriptures and the challenge from stake leaders to read the Book of Mormon. He encouraged the congregants to read the scriptures prayerfully and shared his testimony that they would get answers to their personal questions—that God would speak to them. He then invited all who would like to share their testimonies to do so.

A handful of ward members walked to the stand immediately and shared their feelings and experiences one at a time in an “open mic” setting. The first was a man who shared that “if you put God first, everything will work out.” A woman then shared some experiences from her first year as a schoolteacher and her feelings of falling short. She had attended the temple that week (LDS temples are holy places of worship where individuals make sacred promises with God and are separate from regular meetinghouses used for Sunday services; BYU). While she was there, she felt the impression that what she was doing was right and that God loved her. The next woman shared her feelings about a close friend with brain cancer and asked others to pray for him. She said that she feels like the scriptures are “juicy and delicious” and she loves what they bring to her life. She admitted that even though she had served a mission and taught other people about Jesus Christ, she still wants to learn to access His Atonement more in her life. Another woman shared her experiences with reading from the Bible on her lunch break at work and how God spoke to her through a passage she read in Philippians. Another man explained that he was celebrating his one-year anniversary of coming back to the Church after spending a while on some undesirable paths. He shared that he was grateful for his “second chance with the Church” and testified of Jesus Christ and how he was able to “use the Atonement in a real way.”

Over the course of the 75-minute meeting, seven women and five men shared their testimonies. As a researcher, it was valuable to observe these young adults in a natural setting as they shared with one another the personal experiences and struggles they are having and how their religion influences and guides their lives. While research has shown that adolescents and young adults are often “remarkably inarticulate” about their faith, I found these young adults to be remarkably articulate and candid about their faith in God and the salience of their religious beliefs in their everyday lives. Perhaps traditions such as this testimony meeting give LDS young adults the opportunity to practice talking about faith and the opportunity to see expressions of faith modeled by their peers. (Smith 2005)

A Variety of Activities

There are an amazing number of different, optional activities offered at the Herriman YSA Ward. The printed program from one meeting reminded ward members of the following activities scheduled for the next three weeks: (1) Mix & mingle—a light meal and opportunity to socialize held after church once a month. (2) Home evening—a weekly social gathering held at the meetinghouse every Monday evening. Activities might consist of get-to-know-you bingo, game nights, talent shows, etc. One evening a month is devoted to a community service project. Recent service projects included helping at an animal shelter, raking leaves, working at the food bank, raising money for a boy in the community with cancer, and shoveling snow. (3) Ward temple night—a monthly opportunity to attend a nearby LDS temple and then go out to eat with other ward members. (4) Stake temple night held twice a year in conjunction with stake conference. All members of the stake are invited to attend the temple and have dinner together afterward. (5) Institute classes; religious instruction classes held one night a week at a local building and also at the nearby community college. The program stated: “Be sure to register and attend institute. Depending on how many people we can get to register and attend institute, we will either throw pies at the bishopric’s faces or wax their legs!” (6) Choir practice every Sunday evening for anyone who wants to participate. (7) Addiction recovery meetings; five different groups offered Sunday and Friday nights for young adults who need support in facing addictions in their own lives or the lives of loved ones. (8) Stake service project, a large project for all stake members aimed at home and yard renovations for needy residents of a nearby community. (9) Family history; Spanish speakers were asked to volunteer to help with a family history project and given a phone number to call for more details.

This list was not exhaustive. There was also an upcoming talent show for the stake as well as a two day “summit” for all the members of three young single adult stakes in the region (to include food, inspirational speakers, entertainment activities, and a luau). Certainly there are many opportunities for these young adults to engage spiritually and socially with other young adults in their ward, stake, and beyond. A young woman, 27-year-old Rebecca, said that in other young single adult wards she had sometimes attended activities only to support friends who were in charge of them. She has been in charge before and she knows what it is like, so she wants to support others who are in

charge of activities now. Such relationship support, which is fostered by activities, seems to be an important dynamic among these congregants.

Expectation to Serve

The many activities are a manifestation of the leadership skills of the young single adult members of this ward. While some activities were planned in part by married adults, most of these activities were sponsored by committees of young adults who had accepted “callings” (requests from the bishopric to serve in a certain capacity) to staff them. One ward leader explained that there are 12 different committees that plan and lead different efforts: activities, employment/welfare, facilities, family history, music, technology, ward missionaries, temple, compassionate service, indexing (a part of family history), new member, and institute. In addition to these committees, young single adults make up the presidencies of the Sunday School, Relief Society (women’s group), and elders quorum (men’s group), while other young single adults assist them, such as serving as teachers.

In addition to these leadership and teaching callings, most women in the ward are assigned as “visiting teachers” to visit other women in the ward in their homes monthly and share a gospel message (with slightly less than half of assigned visits being completed every month). Similarly, about half of the men in the ward are assigned as “home teachers,” visiting men and women in the ward monthly and sharing a gospel message (with well over a third of the visits completed each month).

In a church where regular Sunday worship services are already three hours long, it may seem that asking for more time from young adults who already have busy lives would drive them away. Research shows the opposite to be true. Religious groups who expect more of their adherents tend to have members who are more committed to their religion and who exhibit more positive social outcomes. (Smith 2005) In the third wave (2008) of the National Study of Youth and Religion, which examines the religious and spiritual lives of 18 to 23-year-olds in the United States, researchers found that young adults who maintain that religion is important in their personal life are those who also demonstrate external expressions of faith, such as religious service attendance. Similarly, young adults who become less involved in external religious activities substantially reduce the internal importance of religion in their lives. (Smith 2009) Thus, these meetings and activities may provide a meaningful way to strengthen both the internal and external religious identity of ward members.

Drawing in the Next Cohort

As with most congregations of this age group, membership fluctuates and changes over time. Members marry and then attend conventional family wards, graduate from school and move away to begin careers, or in some cases, “age out” of the ward. Members age 31 and older are asked to attend conventional wards or, if available, a single adult ward for those age 31–45. With these events comes the awareness that maintaining the vitality of the ward requires drawing in the next cohort of young single adults. Samantha,

the president of the Relief Society women's group, said that she had recently helped with a devotional meeting for graduating high school seniors in a local conventional stake to learn about young single adult wards. This meeting included young adult speakers who described the different types of activities the ward sponsors and details about the institute program and the classes available. The event also featured a musical number by the young single adult men's choir. Samantha said, "It was really fun because with the choir members there you really could see how we have a lot of fun in the YSA ward and we also come to be spiritually fed and not just get married, get married, get married." She explained that the purpose of the meeting was not to recruit new members but to make them aware that the young single adult ward is there and that they are welcome at it. Samantha lamented, "Sadly, this [meeting] consisted of only 12 youth, but I still think it was a success because a lot of the shepherding couples (older adults asked to serve young single adults in conventional wards) came and got a good glimpse into what goes on at the young single adult ward and can therefore better communicate that to young single adults in the conventional wards."

A Variety of Ward Members

Perhaps the best illustration of spiritual and social life in this congregation is a cross-section of some of the individuals met while conducting this research. Names have been changed.

(1) Alex is a mixed race, African American/Caucasian young man, mid-20s, with mid-length dark hair and partial beard. He was wearing black pants, a black shirt, and chains around his neck. Mrs. Saunders told him that she had missed him at meetings lately. He explained that he had been playing Sunday poker instead, and that he had taken third and won \$50 the week before. She playfully asked which was better, \$50 or "having the Spirit" in his life. They talked for a few minutes and then the bishop put a hand on Alex's shoulder and said that Alex may look rough on the outside, but those who hear Alex share his testimony know he has a soft heart on the inside. Alex described himself as a "combat fighter" who had been involved in gangs and other things in a different city but didn't want to participate anymore because he saw too many of his friends get killed. He agreed that he does have a soft heart inside but that it is pretty bruised. He said he's not really sure what he believes and still has a lot of questions. He mentioned a conversation he had with his brother about religion and politics. While his brother has more Protestant beliefs, Alex is still trying to figure out what he believes and wants to do with his life.

(2) *Lindsay and Kathy*: At the first meeting, there was a library/materials center where two young women were talking and laughing after the meeting. They said they were best friends and had been attending the ward for about year and a half. They had attended the same conventional ward when they were younger. They started attending this ward the fall after they graduated from high school.

Lindsay is a slender 20-year-old with long brown hair. She wore a sticker nametag on her dress that read, "My name is ... **awesome**." When asked what she liked about the

ward, Lindsay said that in the family ward she felt she was seen as a child and not really an individual. She is glad to now have a calling and be involved in the ward and said she feels a sense of unity and connectedness here. She said that she really likes the fact that dating isn't a huge part of the ward culture and that both the current bishop and the bishop before him are "awesome" and really seem to care about her as a person. She said that she always attends the institute classes during the week. She doesn't always remember which scriptures they talked about, but she remembers the discussions about how they apply to her life. She really likes the discussions.

Kathy is a short 19-year-old who wore a flower circlet in her long blonde hair. She was animated as she concurred with Lindsay that the bishop really cares about them and is very sensitive. She said that she likes how it doesn't matter what age people are because everyone is friendly with everyone else in the ward. She told about a recent ward talent show. She sang part of the song "God Help the Outcasts" from Les Misérables that she sang for the show. Kathy said she doesn't attend the same institute class as Lindsay. She is involved on the institute council (a young adult leadership group) and attends institute at a nearby community college during the week. She talked about how much she likes the social connection and the relationships there.

(3) Bridger is a charismatic, athletically built, blond 22-year-old who is currently a college student. Bridger is the only member of the Church in his family. Though he sometimes has conflicts with his parents (particularly his dad) about the time he spends at church activities, he said it is worth it because it is so important to him. He told me that he regularly attends meetings and activities because he loves "to go get spiritual with a bunch of friends." Bridger served a two-year mission for the LDS Church and returned about a year ago. He briefly attended a conventional ward after his mission but said that "got old" really fast and he wanted to be with other young adults. He said he had been engaged to be married, and when things didn't work out he had a hard time. He shared that he has commitment issues now when it comes to dating girls but that he feels very comfortable with his friends. He said: "We're in it together. We're in the same situation, and it's fun." Bridger serves as a ward missionary. He explained that there are about nine young adults serving as ward missionaries. They visit ward members who don't regularly come to church. They reach out to them, invite them to activities, and try to be friends with them. Bridger admits that he loves to go to activities and "make people feel awkward" because he thinks (laughingly) it is a great way to get people out of their comfort zone and open them up. He laughed and said that's the best way to get to know people.

(4) Jenna was a speaker at stake conference. She is a very animated 27-year-old bank teller who has attended the Herriman YSA Ward for about two years. She said she "ward-hopped" for a number of years until the Church reorganized the wards and designated wards based on geographic locations. At first she didn't like the ward because she didn't know people, but she then made a goal to attend every activity the ward sponsored. She said it is a challenge to balance friends, her calling as a ward missionary, her job, and her boyfriend, but she feels that participating in the many activities has been really good for her and helped her get to know people and feel

included. Jenna says the bishop has occasionally asked her to reach out to specific people and be their friend because he knows they are struggling. She really feels connected with the bishop, who she told me often texts her words of encouragement and even attended a volleyball game of the team she plays on with other ward members. When asked about her life goals for the next five years, Jenna joked that “plan A” includes getting married (possibly to her boyfriend who she met in the ward), starting a family, and serving in the Church as a Young Women leader (serving in the organization for girls age 12–17). “Plan B” includes advancing her position at work and attending either a ward for older singles or a conventional ward. When asked how being in the young single adult ward helps with her life goals she answered that it helps her to not become stagnant in who she is; interacting with many different young adults and seeing the different paths they are taking helps her reevaluate her life and choices and helps her become who she wants to be.

(5) Jared came up to a woman being interviewed during the Sunday School hour and in a cheerful but authoritative tone told her that she needed to be in class, to which she playfully responded that he needed to get to class too. She gave him a big hug and told him that she needed to talk to me for a few minutes but she would go to class later. Jared has Down syndrome, and though he is older than 31, ward leaders support his continued membership in the ward because of his unique circumstances. It was clear that Jared is a valued member of the ward. At a recent ward talent show, Jared performed an act as a “super hero.” He demonstrated, with “great sound effects,” how he could lift the audience and throw them around the gymnasium using simple arm movements, and ward members played along by moving their bodies in response to his movements. Jared was disappointed that he didn’t win first place but was satisfied with the “Most Original” award. The men in the ward coordinate weekly efforts to provide rides for Jared to and from ward activities.

(6) Valerie is a 26-year-old business executive with immaculately styled hair and professionally manicured nails. She had been attending the ward for about five months and described this as “a new chapter” in her life. She candidly shared that a few years ago she was engaged, and when the relationship abruptly ended it caused her faith and her identity to be shaken. She turned away from the Church and got involved with a new crowd of friends, resulting in doing things that she had previously believed were wrong. She graduated from college and had great success in her business career, but she felt unhappy and was “not headed where [she] wanted to be.” She said that even though she didn’t want to go to church at the time, she still knew that God was there and cared about her. She said she prayed intently that God would help her know where to go and what to do so she could change her life and find happiness. She described a rapid sequence of events that landed her “the perfect job” and prompted her to move to Utah. She affirmed that it was God opening the doors for her. Right after moving here, Valerie met with Bishop Saunders and began attending the Herriman YSA Ward to help reestablish her spiritual and religious roots. She vividly described her “spiritual backpack” and how bad choices she had made in the past were like rocks she was carrying around. She said that counseling with the bishop has helped her remove the unnecessary baggage so she has room for the things that are important in her life. She

explained that for the past few years she has had very little contact with her parents but that her mom is visiting soon. Valerie is hopeful about reestablishing a relationship with her. She showed a small heart-shaped tattoo on her ankle and said it is a symbol of her journey. Though the LDS Church discourages members from getting tattoos, she said it is the perfect symbol of her nontraditional path to come to know herself and have God and spirituality be a part of her life, and she never wants to forget that. Valerie said that she doesn't participate in many of the ward's activities outside of Sunday meetings because she often works 70 hours a week, but she does play in a volleyball league at the community recreation center with a team of friends from the ward.

The Herriman YSA Ward is a melting pot for a wide variety of young adults. I spoke with young adults of all ages—students, teachers, business professionals; some living at home, some on their own in the world; some deeply rooted spiritually and some were searching for faith. The one thing they had in common was that they call this congregation home. The different stories of the individuals lends valuable perspective about what the ward has to offer these young adults and why they make this faith community a part of their lives.

Finances

As with all LDS wards, funding for the Herriman YSA Ward is allocated from the LDS Church. These funds come from the general members of the LDS Church, who are asked to pay 10% of their income as tithing, as well as other voluntary contributions to support Church initiatives. The paying of tithing is an expression of religious devotion in various religious traditions since ancient times. While specific numbers are unavailable, a large number of active young adult ward members regularly contribute a tithe as an expression of their religious commitment.

Tithing is used to fund Church operations in general and is also allocated back to individual wards and budgeted for use by different ward organizations. The LDS Church has a lay ministry, so Church funds are not used to support local leaders. Specific details regarding the budget of the Herriman YSA Ward were unavailable.

Key Dynamics

The original question of this paper is, what is it that draws young adults to participate in this congregation? Based on observations and interviews, this researcher believe this congregation demonstrates five key dynamics that form a foundation for this faith community: meaningful relationships, adult and peer role models, a robust social environment, opportunities for larger service, and theological and pragmatic tools to help young adults face life challenges.

First and foremost, every young adult interviewed mentioned or demonstrated how relationships are a key factor in their involvement in the young single adult ward. The relationships with married adult leaders were very important, and Bishop Bruce Saunders is a stellar example of a personable leader who is invested in the lives of the

young adults he shepherds. His visits in their homes and involvement at their activities foster meaningful personal relationships. That is no small feat in a congregation this size. In addition, counseling with him individually has had a life-changing impact on many young adults.

The relationships formed with peers are also fundamental. Having people who know you and love you is important to most people. It is clear that the leaders of this ward recognize that and encourage members to reach out in friendship both in the context of Church activities (such as the efforts of the missionary committee) and in other activities (such as the community volleyball team). Many individuals expressed that they felt acceptance from the other young adults and that they didn't have to change who they were in order to fit in to the ward. The young adults were very open and honest with the interviewer and in their testimonies to each other about the challenges they have faced and the choices they have made in their lives. The initial observation of the young man conducting the music in sacrament meeting attested to the fact that perfection is not required to be a part of this congregation—trying hard is good enough. Genuine interpersonal connections are valuable, and this faith community and its members seem to foster authentic relationships.

The second dynamic, tied closely with the first, is the presence of married adult and peer mentors. Mentoring in this context provides examples of successful marriage and family life, facing challenges with faith, and living a Christian life of commitment and sacrifice. At the first meeting and stake conference attended for research, the male leaders of the ward and stake sat next to their wives on the stand, and both husbands and wives were involved in the instruction given to the congregation. They shared serious and humorous stories of struggles and triumphs in their marriages and families. One may observe an affectionate connection between the bishop and his wife as they interact with ward members. In a church where marriage and family are foundational, it seems relevant to have examples of individuals who demonstrate joy found in traditional marriage and family roles. (Gay members are welcome, but they are expected to live celibate lives, as are straight single members.) Examples of strong family relations seem particularly important because many young adults aspire to have their own families but may not come from positive family situations. In addition, the sermons and testimonies shared by adults and peers at the meeting gave specific examples of facing life challenges—from job loss to cancer and addictions to suicide—with faith and hope. The bishop and other older and younger leaders are also remarkable examples of what it means to sacrifice in order to live a Christian life. As Jenna asserted, the lives of other young adults in her ward helped her reevaluate her own life and move forward in her goals.

A third dynamic that seems to attract young adults to this congregation is the robust social environment. Activities are planned for nearly every night of the week, constantly providing young adults with a place to be and something to do that is in harmony with the standards of the LDS Church. Activities such as game nights, talent shows, softball games, and dinners provide opportunities for ward members to get to know one another and have fun together in a non-religious setting. At the same time, midweek religious

instruction and temple activities provide times for the men and women to practice their religion within a social context and, as Bridger said, “get spiritual with a bunch of friends.” The structure of ward and stake groups provides both a smaller and larger context for these young adults to socialize and get to know other young adults who share their beliefs and standards. Many hope that such social opportunities will eventually lead to a happy marriage within the faith.

The fourth dynamic observed as a significant factor in young adult involvement in this ward was opportunities for larger service. In his research of young adults in the United States, Christian Smith and his colleagues found that one of the great challenges facing young adults is a disengagement from civic life. (Smith 2011) Traditions in the wider culture can make life more about ease and pleasure and less about being connected to the lives and needs of others. This faith community challenges that norm by inviting young adults to be a part of something bigger than themselves through meaningful service. That service sometimes takes place in small groups as part of home evening (Monday night) activities each month when ward members partner with individuals and agencies in the community (such as the food bank and animal shelter). It may also take place in a larger group, such as with the stake service activity to help renovate homes and yards of families in need. (Deseret News) Another profound example of larger service is devoting 18 to 24 months as a missionary for the Church, which many of the young adults in this ward had done or were preparing to do. Most active members serve in callings or accept assignments. Clearly, this faith community helps provide members with opportunities for larger service.

The fifth key dynamic observed in this faith community is the presence of theological and pragmatic tools to help young adults face life challenges. Researcher Kenda Dean states, “Cultural tools are the symbols, stories, rituals, relationships and worldviews that we pick up from our experience of the world around us . . . and we use them to construct meaning and guide our actions in the world.” (Dean 2010) Some of the tools I observed include clear teachings and moral directives based on LDS theology, leadership opportunities, coping skills, addiction recovery support, personal counseling with trusted leaders, spiritual experiences, and relationship networks. Young adulthood is filled with questions, difficulties, and transitions that often challenge in dramatic ways the identity formation process of individuals. The tools these young men and women are exposed to through active participation in this faith community provide them valuable resources for weathering life’s storms and establishing clear personal identities. However, the presence of these tools does not guarantee that all young adults will choose to use them. Society and prior life experiences offer other tools that often compete with or sabotage the tools offered in the context of the faith community. While that is to be expected, the faith community gives the young adults many positive tools that can be employed to cope with challenges and develop a mature identity.

One tool of particular interest is the strong influence of moral directives. Members are admonished repeatedly to avoid drug and alcohol use, pornography, and premarital sexual activity. Some of these standards may seem counter-cultural today. However, Smith and colleagues explain that their research shows three other major life challenges

facing young adults today are confused moral reasoning, routine intoxication, and regrettable sexual experiences. (Smith 2011) These behaviors lead to troubled, unstable identities and troubles with engaging fully in an adult world. The presence of strong moral directives in this young single adult ward potentially insulates young adults from the negative consequences associated with these behaviors. Once again, being taught these standards does not mean the young adults always choose to follow them, but they are given access to teachings and mentors that exemplify why the standards are important even when they are not popular.

These five key dynamics contribute to the vibrant spiritual and social environment in the Herriman YSA Ward. While every member does not experience these elements in the same way, they help create a gathering place for young adults to return to again and again as a home for their souls.

Challenges in the Young Single Adult Ward

While the Herriman YSA Ward enjoys a core of active members, it must be said that some young adults only participate occasionally; some prefer to attend a conventional ward instead; and some have become “lost” and don’t attend LDS services anywhere. In seeking to understand why people do attend, we must also reflect on why they do not. One interviewee was Adrienne, an alert, short-haired, 26-year-old phlebotomist who attended the Herriman YSA Ward for nine months after she returned from a mission to Canada. About nine months ago she decided to attend a conventional ward with her family instead of the Herriman YSA Ward because she felt the people there were too young and she “just didn’t mesh.” Someone in the ward had also asked about her about not being married yet and she didn’t like that. She said she may attend a young single adult ward when she moves away from home, but for now Adrienne is a reminder that every young adult experiences the young single adult social setting and relationships differently, and those experiences influence if and where they choose to continue worshipping. Her experience brings up two challenges in the young single adult wards—age diversity and outlook on marriage.

First, these LDS congregations serve young adults ages 18 to 30. This is a large age range and encompasses individuals with different maturity levels and life experiences. It is during this time that young adults experience many transitions toward independence, including moving away from home, attending college, beginning careers, becoming financially independent, and experimenting with different beliefs and relationships. This naturally creates a very diverse congregation. In the Herriman YSA Ward, 238 members are 18 to 24 years old, and 103 are 25 years old or older. While this diversity provides mentorship for younger members, older members may come to feel that they don’t belong, as Adrienne expressed. When discussing the challenges of ministering to a diverse ward, Samantha, the 27-year-old president of the Relief Society, said, “Those people who are done with school and working in their professional lives have very different interests than the recent high school graduates and the newly returned missionaries.” She said they tried doing women’s activities for members over 25, but they were asked to discontinue them because of the division it created among the ward

members. Samantha expressed: “Some of the older sisters were really disappointed because they felt like they were finally finding people their age to go do fun things with. It’s just a challenge since a lot of the guys who are in the 25-plus age range are not active or, if they are, they don’t actively participate in the activities and are good at staying under the radar. So it is just hard.”

Second, these young adults belong to a faith that believes strongly in the importance of marriage and family. Their presence in a young *single* adult ward highlights that they are single. As Bishop Saunders indicated, many ward members, particularly women, struggle with that and long for the opportunity to be married. To put the marriage issue into perspective, the median age at first marriage in the United States is 28.0 for men and 26.2 for women, while the median age at first marriage in Utah is 26.1 for men and 23.5 for women—the lowest in the nation. (Utah Jobs) This is largely due to the high concentration of LDS members in the population. This cultural expectation to marry and the resultant frustration for those who may remain unmarried, whether by choice or lack of opportunity, may lead some to migrate to a more secular community where marriage isn’t seen as the expected trajectory for young adults. At the same time, many men and women find camaraderie with other single members and like that aspect of the ward. Samantha explained, "Sometimes I think a lot of sisters feel like they must have something wrong with them and that is why they are not married. In the singles ward, I have met so many amazing sisters! And I think to myself.... *There is nothing wrong with them! They are fantastic women of God! This is just part of His plan for them.* When I think that about the other sisters in my ward, it helps me accept my singleness as part of His plan for me too. Sometimes in our “Mormon culture” it feels like you shouldn’t be happy if you are single ... which is ridiculous! I think the singles ward has given me so many great examples of hope and faith and joy!"

Another challenge members of the young single adult ward may face is that while all members are currently single, some have been married before. These men and women may find themselves single again due to divorce or the death of a spouse. These life experiences create a unique set of challenges that other young adults may not understand.

There is no perfect arrangement to solve any of these challenges, and not all young adults will find a place where they feel at home with other congregants. This is likely the case with all faith communities. This LDS ward and others like it simply do their best to provide a spiritual and social environment where young single adults can connect, learn, serve, and worship together.

Best Practices

While some key dynamics are peculiar to the structure and theology of its LDS roots, the Herriman YSA Ward also employs some practices that contribute to the efficacy of its ministry to young adults. These practices are easily replicable by other young adult ministries. One such practice is actively involving the young adults in the leadership,

planning, and teaching of the congregation. This level of involvement strengthens commitment and fosters a sense of ownership in the congregation.

Another practice at work in the Herriman YSA Ward is effective communication and social networking. The printed program one meeting contained announcements for upcoming events, phone numbers for married adult and young adult leaders in the ward, meeting schedules, and classroom locations within the building. It also contained directions for accessing information about the ward and stake in a variety of electronic formats, including a weekly email list for the ward and text reminders from the stake.

Facebook: The printed program invited members to join the ward Facebook group. The Facebook group has 263 members, who regularly update it. Recent posts were from teachers (*"It's that time again! I'm teaching this Sunday, Gospel Principles Lesson 18, Faith in Jesus Christ room 108 at 2:10 p.m. Please come and support me!"*), and activity coordinators (*"Softball games tonight at 7 and 8! Bring a glove or two if you have one and come play. Same place as last week."*). This Facebook page also has pictures of past activities and is a forum where members can ask questions (*"So is the Relationships Institute class just for married couples or is it just for anyone and what is it about? What time and day is it on?"*) and invite people to join in on other social activities not sponsored by the ward. (*"I'm thinking of going up to Fifth Water Hot Springs Saturday morning and coming down late afternoon-ish. It's an hour and a half drive and an hour hike up to the hot spring. Let me know if you want to go, anyone's invited"*). This social network site provides a way for the young adults to stay connected with one another and informed about ward activities.

The Riverton YSA Stake also has a Facebook page, with 701 group members. This forum provides similar opportunities for members of the stake to connect and seek help (*"I am looking for an apartment in South or West Jordan close to a bus route. Please message me if you know of anything."*). Reminders are also posted for stake activities (*"Come sing in the summit choir! We will be performing in the Tabernacle, an awesome opportunity! Rehearsal is Sunday."*) This type of networking is an important way to facilitate connections among young adults.

Video Invitation: After stake conference, the stake president explained about this research project and the young adults in his stake. He talked about a new way he found to connect with the stake members and send out reminders. He had recorded a brief video in which he spoke to the members, reminding them about the stake conference and associated activities and inviting them to participate. Another leader in the stake then sent the video out to stake members via cell phones or email. This was the first time this form of communication had been used, but the response was very positive and the leaders plan to use it again. When asked about the video invitation, one member of the Herriman YSA Ward replied, "I did see the video invitation from the stake president about stake conference. I thought it was cool. I thought it was a good way for people to put a name with a face. Most of the time people don't get to know the stake president very well. With so many people moving in and out it was nice. I think less-actives

benefited from it as well. [The stake president's] sincerity and love really showed through."

In addition to these forms of communication, the stake sponsors a Twitter feed that leaders post on regularly to send messages and encouragement to stake members. Recent tweets include, "*We love you! —Stake Presidency*" and "*[The stake president] wants to personally thank everyone who came to Stake Conference & he looks forward to our Book of Mormon challenge.*" This shows that leaders are using the resources of this digital age to connect with and minister to the sheep in their fold.

Conclusion

Danielle stated, "God reaches into every part of our lives." From observations of this congregation, this researcher also believes that membership in the Herriman YSA Ward reaches into every part of the lives of these young men and women. This religious group ministers to congregants in temporal and spiritual ways and provides a community of friends and mentors to support young adults in the many challenges inherent in this stage of life. This faith community expects a great deal from members, but most young people seem to take it in stride and gladly incorporate their religion, including commitments to serve and worship, into their busy lives.

While older leaders have a significant impact on the men and women in the ward, it did not seem that the efficacy of the program was dependent on the charisma or talent of the married leaders. This is largely due to the structure and policies established by the LDS Church to assist those who administer young single adult wards. Thus, the Herriman Young Single Adult Ward is not necessarily an "outstanding congregation" but is likely representative of what many LDS young single adult wards are like throughout the United States. The primary difference among these wards would be the size of the congregation (with larger, more compact wards near the center of the Church in Utah) and whether they are part of a conventional stake or a young single adult stake.

This congregation offers meaningful relationships, significant role models, engaging social events, far-reaching service opportunities, diverse tools and resources for facing life challenges, important leadership opportunities, and substantial theological teachings that provide meaning in the lives of the men and women who come to worship here. Membership in this young adult faith community is certainly more a way of life than a weekly Sunday activity.

Emily Layton, M.S., is a qualitative researcher who studies the influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim individuals and families. Her prior work has focused on religious commitment, religious exploration in adolescence, and identity formation. She is a wife and a mother of five children and enjoys serving in her local LDS congregation.

References

BYU, <https://familylife.byu.edu/Dollahite/Dollahite/S-60%20The%20Mormon%20American%20Family%20chap%20ETHNIC%20FAMILIES%20IN%20AMERICA%202012.pdf>

Dean, K. C. (2010). *Almost Christian: What the faith of our teenagers is telling the American church*. New York: Oxford University Press, p 48.

Deseret News, www.deseretnews.com/article/865580295/Hundreds-of-volunteers-tackle-service-projects-in-Salt-Lake-City.html?pg=all

General Conference Statistical Report, www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/04/statistical-report-2012?lang=eng

Handbook, www.lds.org/handbook/handbook-2-administering-the-church/single-members/16.2#162

Mormon Newsroom, www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/organizational-changes-young-single-adults

Smith, C. and Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, C. and Snell, P. (2009). *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. New York: Oxford University Press, p 252.

Smith, C.; Christoffersen, K.; Davidson, H.; and Herzog, P. S. (2011). *Lost in transition: The dark side of emerging adulthood*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Utah, <http://jobs.utah.gov/wi/pubs/womencareers/factsheet.html>