

The American Conservative

A: Because It's Full Of Mormons

By Rod Dreher
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[Megan McArdle visits Utah to find out why the state succeeds better than any other state in achieving upward mobility.](#) Excerpts:

Once I got there, I found that it's hard to even get a complete picture of how Utah combats poverty, because so much of the work is done by the Mormon Church, which does not compile neat stacks of government figures for the perusal of eager reporters.

The church did, however, give me a tour of its flagship social service operation, known as [Welfare Square](#). It's vast and inspiring and utterly foreign to anyone familiar with social services elsewhere in the country. This starts to offer some clue as to why Utah seems to be so good at generating mobility?—?and why that might be hard to replicate without the Latter-Day Saints.

More:

"Big government" does not appear to have been key to Utah's income mobility. From 1977 to 2005, when the kids in Chetty et al's data were growing up, the Rockefeller Institute [ranks it near the bottom](#) in state "fiscal capacity." The state has not invested a lot in fighting poverty, nor on schools; Utah is [dead last](#) in per-pupil education spending. This should at least give pause to those who view educational programs as the natural path to economic mobility.

But "laissez faire" isn't the answer either. Utah is a deep red state, but its conservatism is notably compassionate, [thanks in part to the Mormon Church](#). Its politicians, like Senator Mike Lee, led the way in rejecting Donald Trump's bid for the presidency. And the state is currently engaged in a major initiative on intergenerational poverty. The bill that kicked it off passed the state's Republican legislature unanimously, and the lieutenant governor has been its public face.

Megan found that Utah's government is startlingly functional. A capable bureaucracy is good — but the real secret seems to be the Mormon Church. Excerpt:

Many charity operations offer a food pantry or a thrift shop. Few of them can boast, in addition, their own bakery, dairy operation and canning facilities, all staffed by volunteers. The food pantry itself looks like a well-run grocery store, except that it runs not on money, but on "Bishop's Orders" spelling out an individualized list of food items authorized by the bishop handling each case. This grows out of two features of Mormon life: the practice of storing large amounts of food against emergencies (as well as giving food away, the church sells it to people for their home storage caches), and an unrivaled system of highly organized community volunteer work.

The volunteering starts in the church wards, where bishops keep a close eye on what's going on in the congregation, and tap members as needed to help each

other. If you're out of work, they may reach out to small business people to find out who's hiring. If your marriage is in trouble, they'll find a couple who went through a hard time themselves to offer advice.

Thing is, the Mormon vision is not welfare-as-a-way-of-life; it's about a temporary hand-up on a family's way back to self-sustainability. McArdle goes on to talk about how Mormon social values — for example, a strong culture of marriage — work to lower poverty. She also mentions that Utah's statistics may be so favorable because blacks are only 1 percent of the population there (Hispanics are 13 percent). Not too many black Mormons in the world. But it shouldn't be overlooked that the white people who populate Utah are a lot more functional than whites elsewhere. The difference is the LDS faith. Even if you aren't Mormon, Mormonism sets the tone for public life. One more excerpt:

No place is perfect. But with mobility seemingly stalled elsewhere, and our politics quickly becoming as bitter as a double Campari with no ice, I really, really wanted to find pieces of Utah's model that could somehow be exported.

Price gave me some hope. The Mormon Church, he says, has created "scripts" for life, and you don't need religious faith for those; you just need cultural agreement that they're important. He said: "Imagine the American Medical Association said that if the mother is married when she's pregnant, the child is likely to do better." We have lots of secular authorities who could be encouraging marriage, and volunteering, and higher levels of community involvement of all kinds. Looking at the remarkable speed with which norms about gay marriage changed, thanks in part to an aggressive push on the topic from Hollywood icons, I have to believe that our norms about everyone else's marriages could change too, if those same elites were courageous enough to recognize the evidence, and take a stand.

And as I saw myself, Mormonism also seems to have a script for a different kind of politics, one that might, just possibly, help us do some of the other things. Enough to make a difference.

[Read the whole thing.](#) It's really good. In [The Benedict Option](#), I talked to Terryl Givens, an LDS academic, about why Mormons are so good at building strong ties to each other within the church. Here is part of what he told me (from the book):

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul urged the believers there to "have the same care for one another. "If one member suffers, all suffer together," the apostle wrote. "If one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it."

The LDS Church lives out that principle in a unique way. The Mormon practice of "home teaching" directs two designated Mormon holders of the church's priestly office to visit every individual or family in a ward at least once a month, to hear their concerns and offer counsel. A parallel program called Relief Society involves women ministering to women as "visiting teachers." These have become a major source of establishing and strengthening local community bonds.

"In theory, if not always in practice, every adult man and woman is responsible for spiritually and emotionally sustaining three, four, or more other families, or women, in the visiting teaching program," says the LDS's Terryl Givens. He adds that Mormons frequently have social gatherings to celebrate and renew ties to community. "Mormonism takes the symbolism of the former and the randomness of the latter and transforms them into a deliberate ordering of relations that builds a warp and woof of sociality throughout the ward," he says.

Non-Mormons can learn from the deliberate dedication that wards—at both leadership and lay levels—have to caring for each other spiritually. The church

community is not merely the people one worships with on Sunday but the people one lives with, serves, and nurtures as if they were family members. What's more, the church is the center of a Mormon's social life.

"The consequence is that wherever Mormons travel, they find immediate kinship and remarkable intimacy with other practicing Mormons," Givens says. "That is why Mormons seldom feel alone, even in a hostile – increasingly hostile – world."

Ideas have consequences. Among the American religious groups whose youth tested lowest for Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, the Mormons stood out. Nobody else was even close. Those folks are doing something right. Those folks are doing a *lot* of things right. The rest of us may reject their theology, but we can learn a lot from them on how to incorporate that faith into family and communal life.