bers present, citing specific instances of need. It was also customary for visiting teachers during this period to apportion and distribute to needy families the commodities donated to the society.

In 1921 visiting teachers were relieved of the personal responsibility of both ascertaining and meeting the material needs of families, but since then they have continued to report confidentially (to the ward Relief Society president) any instances of illness or need requiring attention. Upon hearing such reports, the Relief Society president either visits the family herself or designates the visiting teachers or someone else to give aid as a representative of the society. In cases of economic need, the Relief Society president and ward bishop confidentially inquire concerning the family’s condition to arrange for any needed assistance from Church resources and for means to remedy the situation causing need. This modification of assignment brought visiting teachers into the more agreeable role of friendly visitors carrying messages from the society to the home, yet still fulfilling the original assignment from the Prophet Joseph Smith to “provoke the brethren to good works in looking after the wants of the poor—searching after objects of charity, and in administering to their wants” (General Board, 1966, p. 18).

An observation of Eliza R. Snow, an early president of the Relief Society organization, encapsulates the spirit of visiting teaching: “Many times a kind expression—a few words of counsel, or even a warm or affectionate shake of the hand—will do more good and be better appreciated than a purse of gold” (General Board, 1966, p. 40).

The importance of visiting teaching has been consistently reemphasized by Church Presidents. Spencer W. Kimball exhorted visiting teachers to do as the priesthood teachers do:

“Watch over the Church always”—not twenty minutes a month but always—“and be with and strengthen them”—not a knock at the door, but to be with them, and lift them, and strengthen them, and empower them, and fortify them—and see that there is no iniquity, . . . neither hardness, . . . backbiting, nor evil speaking” (D&C 20:53–54). . . . How glorious is the privilege of two sisters going into a home, soft-pedaling anything that could be detrimental, and instead, building up all the authorities of the Church, the Church itself, its doctrines, its policies, its practices—“And see that [they] meet together often, and . . . do their duty” (D&C 20:55) [Ensign, June 1978, p. 24].

Visiting teaching allows every sister to serve in the Church. Whether active or inactive, single or married, newly baptized or a member of long standing, each can serve effectively as a visiting teacher.

Because of their sensitivity to the home and family and their consequent ability to identify needs that might otherwise go unobserved, visiting teachers give complementary support to the bishop and Relief Society president. They can also become a readily organized corps in times of emergency, crisis, or death. Countless recorded stories demonstrate the effectiveness of the visiting teaching program in extending essential service, love, and compassion to members, particularly the sisters of the Church.

[See also Compassionate Service.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY
General Board of the Relief Society. A Centenary of Relief Society. Salt Lake City, 1942.

MARIAN R. BOYER

VISITORS CENTERS

The Church maintains and staffs several historical sites and visitors centers. Their main functions are to introduce visitors to the history and doctrine of the Church, to help them understand the blessings of the restored gospel, and to strengthen the members and provide them with missionary opportunities.

Most tour guides at visitors centers and historic sites are volunteers, called to serve from six months to two years. They are taught specific information to present to visitors individually or in guided tours, and they are encouraged to meet the needs of their guests, answer questions, and have friendly personal interaction with them. Visitors are taught that the Church is a Christian religion and that Jesus is the Christ. An atmosphere of goodwill and positive public relations is sought for and fostered by the attendants and tour guides.

Visitors centers typically feature visual displays, films, photographs or paintings, replicas, and artifacts regarding the local site, as well as presentations about the Savior Jesus Christ, the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Bible and the Book of
Mormon, and the purpose of life on earth. Books and pamphlets are also made available.

As of 1990, ten visitors centers were located near Church temples. These centers are open to the public and explain the purposes of temples, but the temples themselves are not open to the public once they have been dedicated to sacred services. Visitors centers are located near the temples in Mesa, Arizona; Laie, Hawaii; Idaho Falls, Idaho; Los Angeles and Oakland, California; Mexico City, Mexico; Hamilton, New Zealand; St. George and Salt Lake City, Utah; and Washington, D.C.

As of 1990, seven other visitors centers were also maintained by the Church. They are located in New York City; at the hill Cumorah, near Palmyra, New York; in Nauvoo, Illinois; in Independence, Missouri; in San Diego, California (see Mormon Battalion); at Welfare Square in Salt Lake City; and in Montevideo, Uruguay. Fifteen additional historical sites are likewise maintained and staffed by the Church, offering tours and historical information to all who are interested. Several other historical sites are owned and maintained by the Church but are not staffed.

[See also Historical Sites.]

Gareth W. Seastrand

VITAL STATISTICS

The membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has undergone dramatic growth and increased geographic dispersion, and its composition is unusual in several respects. This discussion of LDS demographics will focus on (1) size, growth, and distribution of the population; (2) sources of growth and redistribution, including fertility, mortality, migration, conversion, and disaffiliation; and (3) composition of the membership in terms of age, gender, race, marital status, household structure, and socioeconomic status. Several of the statistics will be summarized for major geographical regions.

The Church implemented record-keeping procedures from its organization in 1830 (see RECORD KEEPING). Its records provide several sources of information. First, such vital events as the blessing of children (soon after birth) and baptism (after age eight) are recorded, and summary statistics are compiled. Second, a membership record is created and updated with information on marriages, ordinations to the lay priesthood, and geographic relocation. In the United States and an increasing number of other countries, membership records are computerized and some summary statistics are compiled. Third, every ward and branch is instructed to compile quarterly and annual reports that include information on the size of the congregation, numbers in attendance at church services, and group composition. Fourth, sample surveys of the membership have been conducted in the United States and some other countries by the Church's Research Division. These surveys provide up-to-date information comparable to demographic data available at the national level, and provide a basis for comparison between...