Church programs are made available to members living within districts.

Until recent years, there were more districts in the Church than stakes. But Church growth from 1965 to 1990 has changed that ratio. As of January 1, 1991, there were 1,784 stakes and 482 districts in the Church (457 of these districts were outside the United States and Canada).

A district is presided over by a district president, who must hold the Melchizedek Priesthood (either elder or high priest). The district president is nominated by the mission president, approved by the area presidency, called and set apart by the mission president, and sustained by a vote at district conference or district general priesthood meeting. He serves with two counselors and generally serves with a district council of twelve Melchizedek Priesthood holders.

The word “district” is also used to describe certain other Church geographical divisions. For example, a temple district is made up of a number of stakes and/or missions whose members are encouraged to perform their temple ordinances in a designated temple.

WILLIAM S. EVANS

DIVORCE

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints officially disapproves of divorce but does permit both divorce (the legal dissolution of a marriage bond) and annulment (a decree that a marriage was illegal or invalid) in civil marriages and “cancellation of sealing” in temple marriages.

Latter-day Saints believe that God intended marriage to be an eternal union when he commanded that a man and woman “shall be one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). However, under Jewish interpretation of the law of Moses, a man had the right to divorce his wife if she found disfavor in his eyes or for “uncleanness” (adultery or other reasons). The man was required to give his wife a written bill of divorcement, which freed her to remarry (Deut. 24:1–2), although in some cases he was not allowed to “put away” his wife (Deut. 22:29).

Jesus Christ condemned divorce under most circumstances, saying, “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder” (Matt. 19:6). He explained that Moses had permitted divorce only “because of the hardness of your hearts” and because the people could not live the higher law of eternal marriage, “but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:8). To this he added, speaking in the Sermon on the Mount to those who would strive to be the light of the world and the children of God, “Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery” (Luke 16:18; Matt. 5:31–32; 3 Ne. 12:31–32).

The Doctrine and Covenants reiterates the teaching that marriage is ordained of God (D&C 49:15–16). The Church distinguishes between (1) civil marriages, which are valid for “time” (until divorce or the death of one spouse), and (2) temple marriages, or sealings, solemnized by proper ecclesiastical authority, which are binding for “time and all eternity” if the participants are obedient to the gospel (see MARRIAGE: ETERNAL). Legal annulments and divorces free the individuals married civilly for remarriage. Only the President of the Church can authorize a “cancellation of sealing” in temple marriages to free a worthy member to remarry in the temple. Without a cancellation of sealing, divorced members may remarry for time only (see SEALING: CANCELLATION OF).

For nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, feelings about divorce were mixed. President Brigham Young did not approve of men divorcing their wives, but women were relatively free to dissolve an unhappy marriage, especially a polygamous union (see PLURAL MARRIAGE). Such divorces were handled in ecclesiastical courts because polygamous marriages were not considered legal by the government. Records of the number of divorces granted between 1847 and 1877 show a relatively high rate of divorce for polygamous marriages. This rate was high, not so much because polygamy was difficult, but because LDS society had not developed clear rules and expectations for the practice or the participants (Campbell and Campbell, p. 22).

Early Utah laws reflected general LDS beliefs and may have influenced the incidence of divorce. An 1851 territorial divorce law had lenient residency requirements and allowed divorce when it was clear “that the parties cannot live in peace and union together, and that their welfare requires a separation” (First Legislative Assembly of the Territory of Utah, 1851, p. 83).

Current Church statistics on divorces among Latter-day Saints show somewhat fewer divorces among U.S. Mormons than among the general U.S. population. Data from a 1981 Church mem-
bership survey in the United States show that 16 percent of members (as compared to 23 percent of U.S. whites, statistically the most comparable group) had been divorced (Goodman and Heaton, p. 93). Latter-day Saints in Canada, Great Britain, Mexico, and Japan were more likely than their respective national populations to be divorced. However, converts who had divorced before joining the Church contributed to the relatively high proportion of divorced members outside the United States.

Recent U.S. data from the National Survey of Families and Households indicate that about 26 percent of both Latter-day Saints and non-LDS have experienced a divorce (Heaton et al., Table 2). If these trends continue, researchers project that about one-third of recent U.S. LDS marriages may end in divorce (Goodman and Heaton, p. 92). Nationally, experts predict that 50–60 percent of recent marriages will end in divorce or separation (Cherlin, p. 148).

Societal pressures and individual characteristics affect the likelihood of divorce. There will be a higher incidence of divorce among Latter-day Saints if they marry younger than age twenty or older than age thirty, have less than a college education, or marry outside the faith. These factors correlate with factors influencing divorce among U.S. citizens generally. In addition, divorce is more common when Latter-day Saints marry within the faith but do not have the marriage sealed in the temple. Goodman and Heaton found that such marriages are five times more likely to end in divorce than are temple marriages (p. 94). Those who choose a temple marriage usually are more committed to the Church and are required to comply with strict behavioral standards of chastity and fidelity to qualify for the temple marriage.

Severe personal and economic consequences usually accompany divorce among Latter-day Saints. LDS women are often not well prepared to support themselves and their children, and men may pay little in child support or alimony. About one-third of female-headed LDS households, a majority of which were the result of divorce, are living in poverty, despite a high rate of employment among single mothers (Goodman and Heaton, pp. 101, 104).

Divorced Latter-day Saints have lower religious participation than married members. They attend Church less often, and they pray, pay tithing, and hold Church callings less frequently than married members. These may be symptomatic of both the causes and the consequences of divorce.

Divorced Latter-day Saints are also more likely to remarry than the general divorced U.S. population. More than three-fourths of divorced Mormons probably will remarry (Goodman and Heaton).

After the divorce of their parents, most LDS children live with their mothers. They attend Church less frequently than children in two-parent households, even when the custodial parent attends regularly. Church researchers estimate that one-third of LDS children in the United States will live with a single or remarried parent.

Twentieth-century Church leaders speak of divorce as a threat to the family. In the April 1969 general conference, President David O. McKay declared, “Christ’s ideal pertaining to marriage is the unbroken home, and conditions that cause divorce are violations of his divine teachings. Except in cases of infidelity or other extreme conditions, the Church frowns upon divorce” (IE 72 [June 1969]:2–5). President Spencer W. Kimball said that relatively few divorces are justifiable. He also told members that divorce frequently results from selfishness and other sins of one or both spouses (Kimball, 1975, p. 6). Other Church leaders also emphasize selfishness and mention additional causes of divorce, such as poor choice of a marriage partner, infidelity, lack of understanding of the divine nature of marriage, poor financial management, and lack of continued marital enrichment. “The current philosophy—get a divorce if it doesn’t work out—handicaps a marriage from the beginning” (Haight, p. 12).

Church leaders urge members to prepare for marriage, marry within the faith, marry in the temple, live righteously and nurture their marriage relationships, pray for guidance, and counsel with each other and with priesthood leaders to resolve differences and deter divorce. Priesthood leaders are advised to help members strengthen their marriages but, when necessary, to permit divorce and to determine whether disciplinary action should be taken against any spouse guilty of moral transgression, such as infidelity or abuse. Priesthood leaders are to “cast out” (i.e., excommunicate) unrepentant adulterers from among the Saints, but to accept the victims of divorce (D&C 42:74–77).

Church members who are divorced and the children of divorced parents sometimes report feelings of isolation or lack of acceptance because of
the strong orientation toward two-parent families in the Church (Hulse, p. 17). Church leaders admonish all members to be sensitive to the needs of people in difficult circumstances and to offer help and appropriate encouragement and compassionate service wherever possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


KRISTEN L. GOODMAN

DOCTRINE

[This entry consists of five articles:

- Meaning, Source, and History of Doctrine
- Distinctive Teachings
- LDS Doctrine Compared with Other Christian Doctrines
- Harmonization of Paradox
- Treatises on Doctrine

For related articles, see, generally, Articles of Faith; Gospel; Jesus Christ; and Plan of Salvation. See also Intellectual History and Smith, Joseph: Teachings of. For articles of a philosophical nature, see Epistemology; Ethics; Knowledge; Metaphysics; Philosophy; Reason and Revelation; Theology; and Truth, among others.]