



**AND WOE UNTO
THEM THAT ARE
WITH CHILD IN THOSE DAYS**

Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

It isn't easy these days to be a Momon mother of four. In the university town where I live, fertility is tolerated but not encouraged. Every time I drive to the grocery store, bumper stickers remind me that Overpopulation Begins At Home, and I am admonished to Make Love, Not Babies. At church I have the opposite problem. My youngest is almost two and if I hurry off to Primary without a girdle, somebody's sure to look suspiciously at my flabby stomach and start imagining things. Everybody else is pregnant, why not I?

Open a woman's magazine and I'm told that the most responsible step I can take is to limit the size of my family. I can't do much about the four I've got, but obviously having a fifth would be blatantly irresponsible. Open the *Ensign* and I am warned of the woeful consequences should I "wall up the path of life over which new spirits must cross to enter a mortal body." Clearly, to prevent the birth of a fifth child would be sinful.

I apparently have two choices. I can selfishly gobble up more of the earth's scarce resources by having another child when I know that in the time it takes you to read those words four children will have died from starvation; or, I can selfishly refuse to bear more children when I know that there are spirits languishing in the pre-existence waiting to enter mortality.

To a non-Mormon it might seem more responsible — and even more Christian — to take care of hungry babes on earth before worrying about those in heaven. It's not that simple, however, it being much easier to get pregnant than to figure out how to share the food on your plate with the starving masses in India. As for the United States, there are signs of dissension among the population experts. Conrad Taeuber, supervisor of the 1970 census, argues that our population problems "are and will be much more a matter of geographic distribution and the way we use our resources than of the rate of increase in our total numbers."¹ Affluence, selfishness, and a madcap rush to the cities are creating the crisis — not our one per cent rate of growth. Limiting one's family might be a futile gesture, simply helping to relieve the pain while Americans amass more and

¹"Census Sense," *Newsweek* (January 25, 1971), 78. Troubled Mormons have been quick to note the growing number of "anti-explosionists" among the experts. See, for example, Philip F. Low, "Realities Of The Population Explosion," *The Ensign*, 1 (May 1971), 18-27.

more goods for fewer and fewer people at greater cost to our environment and with little noticeable effect on the world's problems. In this view, genuine patriotism combines with orthodox Mormonism in asking that we become less materialistic, more willing to share.

A Mormon mother, then, shouldn't feel guilty about having more than two children, especially if she is willing to:

1) ride a bicycle; 2) bathe less often; 3) use non-phosphate detergents; 4) move to North Dakota, Mississippi, or Wyoming; and, 5) live the Word of Wisdom.²

Even the most stringent ecological housekeeping has its limits, however. By teaching love and brotherhood I can put three children in a bedroom instead of one; with thrift and ingenuity I can stretch my share of the earth's resources to feed eight instead of two, but do I have the Godlike perfection to invite not only my own children but their children and their children's children to share my one acre? And if not my acre, whose? On the personal level, an exponential rate of growth is everybody coming home to Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma's house and staying to reproduce. At a certain point you run out of space.

While the "anti-explosionists" argue that the U.S. growth rate, 17.6 births to 9.6 deaths per thousand, is not excessive and can be managed, what would they say of the Mormon performance — 28.41 births to 4.78 deaths per thousand,³ giving us a population increase on a par with most of Asia and only a few percentage points under Africa and Latin America, a rate of growth which, if applied universally, could only result in disaster?

The earth's population reached a billion in 1830,⁴ a rather slow rate of increase even allowing for a clean start after the Flood, but the second billion took only a hundred years — until 1930, and we had added our third billion by 1960, thirty years later. Even conservative estimates predict six billion people by the year 2000.⁵ According to demographers, we have multiplied and replenished and now threaten to overwhelm the earth. The more hopeful population experts point to low birthrates in developed countries and insist that as nations become industrialized and educated the birthrate will fall into balance with the death rate. The Mormon record, however, seems to deny that hope. With more than our share of educated parents, we have achieved a fertility only slightly less alarming than our longevity. Applying the Kantian imperative can only result in discomfort.

Yet the First Presidency, in a signed statement dated 14 April 1969, has urged Latter-day Saints not to limit their families⁶ One might assume

²Latter-day Saints may have overlooked the ecological significance of Doctrine and Covenants 89:12-13. Note that Paul Ehrlich in chapter five of *The Population Bomb* lists as "inalienable right" number three, the right to eat meat.

³From April Conference annual statistical report, *Church News*, 10 April 1971, p. 11.

⁴Eschatologists can make of that date what they will. It occurs to me that the prophecy of Daniel might be helpful.

⁵"1970 World Population Data Sheet," Population Reference Bureau, 1755 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Washington, D.C.

⁶This letter was not published, as far as I can determine, but was mailed to Bishops and Stake Presidents for use in counseling members. Philip Low, in *The Ensign* article mentioned above, quoted part of this letter. He omitted the section which seems to sanction

that in the Lord's eyes there is no population problem. Perhaps the number of spirits destined to come to earth is finite and about to run out. Or perhaps the population problem, like so many of the crises man has created for himself, is so beyond our ability to solve that the best we can do is build our own homes and let God take care of the rest. Is the population question, then, one more example of the classic confrontation between faith and reason? Must we choose to follow the prophets or the experts? Intellectual Mormons, by cultivating a little righteous hypocrisy, might be able to hearken unto both.

Notice that the First Presidency addressed themselves to Latter-day Saints through their Bishops, not to the world at large. Unlike the Catholic hierarchy our leaders have made no attempt to fight world population control; they have simply ignored it, directing their pronouncements to their own people.

To a haggard mother of four in a fledgling stake in the mission field, the reason seems obvious. While there are unquestionably too many Indians in India and too many commuters on Boston's Route 128, there are simply not enough Mormons. Who, while driving 45 miles to church meetings, can find dismaying the possibility that the Church will double by the year 2000 simply by continuing to reproduce at the rate of two per cent a year? Now, one may argue that our population problem is more a matter of distribution than numbers, that more babies will not make life easier in New England if they all grow up and move to California. There is some truth in this. Yet in the pioneer era, with some help from our neighbors, Mormons showed real talent for population redistribution. There is no reason why it couldn't be done again, given sufficient numbers.

Of course, we don't need more *people* in New Hampshire, just more Mormons. That explains why having babies is not enough. We've got to persuade other people to stop having them. To take a familiar example, I can have four children without upsetting the national average of 2.5 because Paul Ehrlich, convinced that mindless people like me would produce four, was patriotically sterilized after one child. When we compute how many sterilized males will be required to offset those champion Mormon families of nine or ten, it becomes clear why we must enthusiastically support such organizations as Zero Population Growth and the Campaign to Check the Population Explosion.⁷

The proponents of Z.P.G. suggest adoption to those who want a large family. At first look this seems like an ideal solution for Mormondom. Our belief in the pre-existence suggests that in a real sense even natural children are adopted; with sealing in the Temple they are as much ours as if they had been born to us. Parents with ten adopted children can't seriously be accused of having limited their family.

birth control when the "health and strength" of the mother are threatened. "Health and strength" are rather broadly defined among Mormon women I know.

⁷Some readers of this paper have objected to the suggestion that Mormons support Z.P.G., insisting that my modest proposal is outrageous. I can only answer that in my opinion certain champions of the two groups have a lot in common. They are only apparently attacking each other. What they are really attacking is a common enemy — the attractive but misguided notion that family size can safely be left to personal choice.

Such a solution, however, is based on the premise that those who don't want children will continue to produce them for those who do. With liberalized abortion laws, healthy white infants are becoming harder and harder to find. At this writing, children of minority races are still available, yet many Mormons will think twice before adopting a Negro child, not because of racial prejudice but because of a realistic understanding of the problems such a practice might bring. Parents can give a child love, but not acceptance by society, not the Priesthood. Yet, even this hurdle could be overcome by traditional Mormon cooperation. If enough families adopted minority children, social acceptance would come. We have been told many times that Negroes will eventually have the Priesthood. Certainly if they were our own children, we would pray harder for that time to be shortened.

There is a serious objection to adoption, however, when compared with conception. Adoption requires not just one act but a series of acts, a sustained commitment. During the long months of waiting for their child, adoptive parents are allowed, even encouraged, to change their minds. You have to be sure you want a baby to adopt one. It's therefore an unreliable way for a group to grow. How would the Mormon birthrate look if people had to think that hard about getting pregnant?

Now, critics may point out, and rightly so, that through more effective missionary work we can increase the number of Mormons without increasing the number of people. This is easier said than done. I for one can testify that it's easier to produce a baby a year than a convert. It is apparent, however, from a look at Church population data that converts and babies are equally important in determining our growth rate. In 1970 we converted 79,126 persons, about the same rate of increase as by births.⁸ Taken together, these two forces can result in spectacular growth. Assuming a constant conversion rate and a constant rate of natural increase, there could be twenty-three million Mormons in forty years. In just ninety years we could number 300 million, a striking achievement in and of itself, but even more astounding when we consider that if the goals of Zero Population Growth are attained, the population of the United States will have stabilized at 300 million by the year 2000.

Our converts will have to come from the general population, of course. And for this reason it may be important to encourage reversible forms of birth control; sterilized converts won't do us much good. The political implications must also be considered. Won't Mormon fertility be discovered and penalized before it threatens to take over the country? We'll just have to hope that by then there will be enough Mormons in high places to protect us. On the other hand, a certain amount of persecution might be helpful in uniting the Church and convincing parents of the righteousness of this cause.

Some people may doubt our ability to maintain the present level of production under normal conditions. So far there seems no cause for worry. Still, pressures from society at large will probably affect some women. Should the birthrate show signs of slipping, Church officials, in the mission field

⁸April Conference Report, *Church News*, 10 April 1971, p. 11.

at least, might achieve good results by releasing mothers from one church job for every child after the fourth.

But what of those women who don't want a big family, who believe that such decisions are personal, not to be determined by pressures from government or Church, who are convinced that each woman is unique, that what stretches the capacity of one breaks another, that talents are variously given, that each woman is judged, not by the size of her family, but by how she makes use of her total endowment as a human being?

They have a point. Having children is one thing; raising them is another. What good can be accomplished by mothers who explode with the population? To these women I say: fast and pray and take comfort in statistics. To belabor a previous example, I can stop at four children without affecting the Mormon birthrate because my sister-in-law, who does a better job of such things than I, has eight.

Will I have more children? I might. Yet right now four seems like a nice, independent number — just twice too many for Zero Population Growth and only half enough to fill a row in Sacrament Meeting. All things considered, I think I can be quite comfortable just where I am, as long as Mormons keep having babies and the rest of the country stops.

