



In early spring 1820, when he was just fourteen years old, Joseph retreated to a grove near his home in Palmyra, New York with an intent to pray for guidance. According to his account later detailed in *The Pearl of Great Price* - one of Mormonism's standard works – it was there that he experienced a divine visitation. In this encounter often called 'The First Vision,' he reported being visited by God and Jesus Christ who instructed him not to join any existing church because they were all wrong. Instead, he would be instrumental in restoring the true Church of Jesus Christ on earth - marking the inception point for what would ultimately become The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). This foundational event became central to LDS theology signifying its distinctiveness from other Christian traditions.

## **Formation and Persecution of the Early Mormon Church**

The early years of the LDS church were marred with social ostracism and violent persecutions. In Missouri, for example, tensions culminated in an executive order known as the "Mormon Extermination Order" issued in 1838 resulting in expulsion or death for members of the LDS church. Likewise, in Illinois where they sought refuge and built the city Nauvoo under Smith's leadership; conflicts persisted leading to his arrest on charges including treason against Illinois state law. In June 1844 while awaiting trial at Carthage Jail he was assassinated by an armed mob - marking a turning point for both Joseph Smith's life and his burgeoning religious movement.

## **The Introduction of Plural Marriage**

The adoption of plural marriage further exacerbated societal tensions around Mormons. The wider American society viewed polygamy as an affront to traditional family values, exacerbating hostility towards Latter-day Saints that eventually led to legal measures against them. It wasn't until 1890 when then LDS Church president Wilford Woodruff issued what came to be known as "the Manifesto," officially ending the practice of plural marriage within the church, that some tension eased between Mormons and their surrounding communities.

## **Migration to Utah and Brigham Young's Leadership**

Brigham Young's tenure was marked by great innovation and expansion. He established more than 300 settlements throughout Utah and surrounding states while introducing doctrines that further differentiated Mormonism from mainstream Christianity. His strong leadership ensured survival amidst harsh living conditions; fostered economic self-sufficiency through communal living practices like the United Order; and promoted education with institutions such as Brigham Young University now bearing his name. Despite contentious relations with federal government due to issues like polygamy and church-state governance concerns, under Young's stewardship the LDS Church grew exponentially both demographically and geographically.

# **The Evolution of Modern-day LDS Church**

Today's LDS Church is centralized and hierarchical yet also offers local autonomy within each congregation or "ward." It emphasizes education - owning universities and offering seminary programs for high school students; it runs an expansive welfare system assisting both members and non-members alike; it sponsors large scale humanitarian projects across the globe; it places strong emphasis on family values including genealogy work which feeds into their extensive Family History Libraries. All these aspects have shaped modern Mormonism making it one of today's fastest growing religions globally.

## **Contemporary Mormonism: Beliefs, Practices, and Influence**

In terms of influence, the LDS church is prominent particularly in Utah where its headquarters is located. It plays a significant role not just religiously but socially and politically too with several notable figures like Mitt Romney having been affiliated with it. Despite its contentious history marked by persecution to forced migration from New York to Utah; today's LDS church enjoys greater acceptance even while some aspects - such as exclusionary policies towards LGBT individuals continue to spark debates within and outside the community.