Ben McAdams is neat, he’s helpful, he’s unfailingly polite. The 35-year-old is a family man, one of six siblings and a father of three. People warm quickly to him, and talk of his modesty and strong work ethic. He neither drinks nor smokes. And when we meet for breakfast in a sparsely decorated canteen in Salt Lake City, he is wearing a dark suit and a tie.

In other words, McAdams is what the world expects of Mormons.

In other ways, however, he is less typical. Until recently, he was a fast-rising star at Davis Polk, a prestigious New York law firm – a job he won straight from Columbia University’s law school. He then worked for both Bill and Hillary Clinton, before becoming, at 35, Utah’s youngest state senator. His is the most conservative state in the US, and yet he’s a moderate Democrat who won his district – and his reputation – by helping to broker a deal over gay rights. This, mind you, from a man whose church was pilloried for bank-rolling California’s successful 2009 “Proposition 8” referendum against gay marriage. Whose faith was a headache to Mitt Romney throughout Romney’s 2008 presidential run. And whose religion has been unable to shake a reputation for “plural marriage”, officially abandoned in 1890.
Put simply, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS for short, has an image problem; and yet, tellingly, McAdams doesn’t. And he’s part of a much bigger crowd: for the first time in its nearly two-century history – one that began, according to the founding myth, with an illiterate farmhand, Joseph Smith, being visited by an angel in western New York state – Mormons are moving from the periphery of modern American life to the very centre. From Romney’s failed tilt at the presidency to the tales of everyday polygamous families in HBO’s popular drama Big Love, Mormonism has become increasingly visible over the last generation. Where its most famous acolytes were once the Osmonds, leading lights now include politicians such as US Senate majority leader Harry Reid (a Democrat) and Romney (a Republican); Stephenie Meyer, author of the Twilight vampire saga; Glenn Beck, the popular conservative talk-show host; and self-help guru Stephen R. Covey, the author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

Those are the household names. As important are the Mormons who play central roles at the companies and institutions that make America tick: Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University (one of the biggest in the US); David Neeleman, founder of JetBlue Airlines; J.W. (“Bill”) Marriott, head of Marriott International; and Jon Huntsman Jr, ambassador to China – to name a few. And while firm data are hard to come by, off-the-record interviews conducted for this article suggest that a generation of Mormons in their thirties and forties is accelerating the trend. For every Hill Cumorah Pageant – an annual set of performances starting this weekend in which a cast of 650 enact scenes from the Bible and Book of Mormon before massive audiences near Joseph Smith’s birthplace – there are much more mundane scenes being played out across the US: an investment banker in New York said, “I was at my final day of interviews at JPMorgan during my senior year in college. They took students from Princeton, Yale, Harvard, U-Penn and Brigham Young University [a Mormon university in Utah]. I was like, ‘what the hell? BYU?’ Then I slowly realised how many Mormons there are on Wall Street.”

The CIA has its eye out for Mormons, who, people say jokingly, ace the mandatory drugs and lie-detector tests. Blue-chip corporations are recruiting, too. And at Harvard Business School, female students note ruefully that attractive male classmates are invariably associated with one of the “three Ms”: the military, the management consultancy McKinsey or Mormonism.

In that complaint lies the conundrum: much of the US still sees Mormons as weirdly strait-laced at best, cultish at worst. Yet elite institutions are embracing them. What does that fact say about the world’s youngest major religion – and about success in modern America?

...
Despite its public reputation, the Mormon church is the outstanding religious success story of the past hundred years. Approximately 1.7 per cent of the US population are LDS members, just slightly fewer than describe themselves as Jewish. Global membership rose from 250,000 in 1900 to one million in 1948, to 13 million today. The church is probably the world’s richest per capita religious institution, too, with assets estimated at between $25bn and $30bn. (That’s £16bn-£20bn; the Church of England’s portfolio in 2009 was £4.4bn.)

Religious sociologist Rodney Stark, at Baylor University in Texas, has predicted that the LDS will in the latter half of this century become the first new world religion since Islam – just one reason that Smith, who founded the church in the 1830s, is sometimes described as the “American Mohammed”. There is something special about Mormons, but what is it? The most fashionable theory regarding religious success at the moment comes from economics, drawing on approaches developed by the University of Chicago’s Gary Becker. Becker, a sociologist and economist, argues that American church pews are kept full – while those in Europe empty out – because the US is unencumbered by religious monopolies (such as the Church of England or the Catholic Church), leaving plenty of room for competition and choice. And indeed, one-quarter of US Mormons are first-generation converts. The US’s National Council of Churches data from 2008 rank the LDS fourth among church membership in the US, with 5.8 million members – a rise of 1.56 per cent from the previous year.

Yet growth alone doesn’t explain why some religions break into the boardroom and why some don’t. American Jews and Hindus stand out in socio-demographic surveys for their exceptional incomes and professional accomplishment, but this flows not from growing membership, rather from heavy investment in education and, in the case of Hindus, successive waves of immigration by highly trained elites such as doctors and engineers. Mormon success is different: unlike Hindu immigrants, the newest LDS members in America – converts – tend to be poorer and less educated than those with longer heritage in the church. And older generations aren’t exactly funding ever-greater achievement by younger ones: the PEW Forum on Religion in Public Life describes Mormonism as lying “roughly in the middle of other religious traditions on the socioeconomic spectrum”.

...
Perhaps the most telling sign that Mormon success springs from different roots is this fact: the church’s most successful members, in terms of education and wealth, are also its most fervent. In most religions, piety and professional success mix badly. Devout Jews earn less, and tend to be less educated, than their less-orthodox brethren. American Christian evangelicals save and earn less than those from more moderate traditions.

Back at the canteen in Salt Lake City, McAdams reflects on why growing up Mormon seems to help with professional achievement in modern America. “I grew up here in Utah in a working-class family,” he tells me. “My dad had any number of jobs over the course of my childhood. Never one for too long, and with gaps in-between. He wasn’t the greatest Mormon either, drinking and smoking. So we pretty much lived pay cheque to pay cheque.” His was a childhood of limited horizons. It wasn’t the case that money and success begot more money and success. Rather, says McAdams, the thing that started to make a difference was being a missionary.

At age 19, all Mormon men are expected to spend two years on a mission. (Women serve too, but for 18 months, and at age 21.) It’s tough. They pay their own way, often saving from childhood. There is no discussion over destinations: McAdams served in São Paolo, despite learning French for four years at school. And the pre-mission training is gruelling: held at one of two dozen training centres around the world (one is in Preston, Lancashire), “you get up early and work 12 hours a day”.

At the MTC’s headquarters, in Provo, Utah, visitors are not allowed: my request for a tour gives pause to the church’s otherwise well-oiled public affairs department. It takes weeks for the OK to arrive. When I visit the campus in late February, I find a dozen redbrick buildings with views of snow-capped mountains. Inside one building, I walk down a long, empty corridor with pictures of Joseph Smith on the walls alongside framed snaps of missionaries. A young man in white robes stands, mid-baptism, waist deep in the sea; the photo is labelled “Suava, Fiji, 1999”. In another shot, two teenagers in blue overalls stand next to a bale of hay: “Seridal, Japan, ’85”.

Here and at the other training centres, new arrivals are assigned a “companion”; they will study, eat, exercise and sleep side by side through the length of their stay. Life inside is regimented, and leaving the grounds is not allowed. Ralph Smith, the MTC’s president, says: “These young people are like most 19-year-olds, going to school and playing video games. And here they are plunked down into a situation here which is very structured, with significant demands on them to study, work hard and set goals for themselves.” He swivels round his monitor to show me a typical timetable, for a female missionary heading to Ukraine. Her day begins at 6.30am, with lights out at 10.30pm, sharp. She spends most of her time studying Ukrainian, with shorter periods for eating, exercising and religious study.

McAdams says the MTC opened his eyes, not so much to discipline as opportunity. “I found myself there alongside peers whose fathers were bishops in the church, or from wealthier families. It was an environment which wasn’t predetermined by who my parents were.”
Rodney Stark’s work shows that successful religions normally find ways to “socialise the young”, and he argues that “nothing builds more intense commitment than the act of being a missionary”. If missionary training is tough for young Mormons, the sink-or-swim experience that follows is often worse. I met with McAdams after our talk in the canteen, for a conversation outside Utah’s gold-embossed senate chamber. I wanted to discuss his time as a missionary in Brazil. “Everybody says going on a mission is the best two years of your life,” he says. “But that quote is not given by anyone in their first six months.” McAdams remembers that, despite his language training, “I still couldn’t really speak to anyone, and no one understood me. I remember dreaming in English and then waking and remembering I was in Brazil, where there was no one I could communicate with. It was incredibly frustrating.” During a missionary posting, all contact with family is banned, except for phone calls at Christmas and on Mother’s day. And reading anything other than Mormon scripture is frowned on. A senior investment banker and Mormon based in London, who was also a missionary in Brazil, recalls how alienating this could be: “I remember one of the very first lunches. All I wanted was a drink of water, and I was ashamed because I didn’t know how to say it. I literally started to break down.”

Armaund Mauss, professor emeritus of sociology and religious studies at Washington State University who specialises in the study of Mormons, has noted a “seeming paradox” in religion, in which some faiths inspire loyalty precisely because “people become committed to that for which they suffer or sacrifice”. And yet the suffering built more than loyalty; it helped McAdams and his peers develop skills eminently useful in modern-day business and government. As his fluency improved and he learnt to overcome the rejection that followed unsuccessful attempts to convince converts, McAdams embraced the experience. And when it became clear that he was competent at his work, the Church asked him to become a “trainer”, helping other missionaries develop their skills. It was a subtle process of leadership development.

Mormon and management guru Stephen Covey, who served his mission in the 1970s in London, says the time abroad changed his life. While he is careful to stress that the ideas in his books are not based on his Mormon faith but upon what he calls universal, timeless principles, he does remember particularly enjoying the chance to preach in public. “I would hold public meetings at the front of movie lines, on the top of buses, at Speakers’ Corner, or outside the Tower of London. Anywhere I could get an audience.” He returned to America to tell his father he no longer wanted to enter the family business. Instead he wanted to be a teacher, ultimately signing up to become a student at Harvard Business School, and then an academic. His mission, he says, “taught me to take responsibility early in life. It gave me my voice.”

At the time, Covey’s decision to go to Harvard Business School was unusual. But a former senior figure at the school told me that, over the past 20 years, there has been a significant rise in Mormon applicants. A more worn path for those missionaries with ambitions leads to Utah’s Brigham Young University, the Mormon equivalent of Harvard. The church subsidises entry, so LDS students pay only about $5,000 a year, one-tenth of what full-paying students at Ivy League colleges do. In some ways, BYU looks every inch an elite American institution. In others it is starkly different: the day I visit, the campus is at a standstill for a sermon from a church elder. I have come to meet Kim Smith and Jim Engebretsen, two former executives at Goldman Sachs and Lehman Brothers and now both professors at BYU’s Marriott School of Business. Smith says Mormons were rare on Wall Street when he first got a job in the early 1980s. But, as he puts it, “banks like nothing more than finding an undervalued stock. And Mormon graduates were just that: a stock which was cheaper to buy, and which over-performed.”

Engebretsen uses a different analogy: Michael Lewis’s baseball book, *Moneyball*. “Remember how Lewis talks about how the Oakland A’s would find a second-rounder, and bring him in the first round instead? He’d perform way better. The same is true for someone at BYU. If they think this is their chance to play in the big leagues, they are going to work really, really hard.”
They are also going to get more support, from family and community. I’d seen piles of free wedding magazines near the dining hall, and no wonder: about half of BYU students are married when they graduate. A professor who asked not to be named says: “Being married, perhaps already having a family, makes you more serious about life. It’s OK to tell your parents your grades aren’t good, but try explaining it to your spouse.”

Smith argues that church membership smooths out other hassles, too. During his time at Goldman Sachs, he was asked to move to Tokyo, “a completely alien culture”. But, he says, “I was made to feel part of the LDS community within days. Because I felt comfortable, and my family felt comfortable, and I was more effective at work.” McAdams tells a similar story, of first arriving in New York for graduate school: “My wife and I packed up a van and drove our stuff across country. When we showed up at our place, there were 15 people there to help us unload. We’d never met any of them before, but they moved us in and invited us over for dinner. We had an instant social network.” He found that this same church network also provided helpful connections, both within his own law firm and to other people in the same industry.

The networking advantage is particularly important in understanding Mormonism because the church has no professional clergy. Mormon boys enter the priesthood at age 12, taking the title of deacon. At 14 they become a “teacher”, then a full priest at 16. Each title, and each progression, comes with new responsibilities, and at each stage a smaller number become leaders among their own age-group. The system isn’t perfect. Not everyone is comfortable with the responsibility the church demands. And most senior leaders are men; the church seems to implicitly rely on a traditional, single-earner family structure to help its male leaders balance jobs, church responsibilities and families. But the result remains that most of the church’s senior leadership positions are filled by professionally successful Mormons taking time off from their careers. Perhaps the most celebrated example is Kim Clarke, who quit as dean of Harvard Business School in 2005 to become head of BYU’s campus in Idaho. His colleagues were baffled: “For them, it was like going into the wilderness,” he tells me. Later he hit upon a phrase to explain his choice: “Try to imagine you got a phone call from Moses.”
In the meantime, the calls are coming from headhunters. Scott Nycum, a managing director at JPMorgan, confirmed that BYU is now seen as a top source of graduate talent: "These students are bright, mature, well-educated, share our emphasis on adhering to highest standards of integrity, have impressive work ethic and are very team-oriented," he says. "They fit extremely well with our firm's corporate culture."

Focus group research conducted with corporate recruiters by BYU's Marriott School of Business found that its MBA students, while not noted as flashy leaders, were known in particular for their "outstanding values, principles, and work ethic". A Goldman Sachs executive, meanwhile, says the bank is hiring LDS graduates in increasing numbers, also impressed by their work ethic. The same was true, I heard anecdotally, at top-tier law firms in the US. And the CIA is reported to snap up LDS graduates for, if nothing else, their language skills.

Will any of this change perceptions of the Mormons? As the late writer and journalist Molly Ivins wrote, anti-Mormon bigotry is an "old dog that still hunts". But more up-to-the minute cultural analysis suggests otherwise: an episode of South Park cheers the way a newly arrived LDS family wins over the local community with pleasantries and acts of kindness.

Ben McAdams thinks that while outright discrimination is rare, many successful Mormons keep their heads down at work. Still, he says, "I didn’t stand out like a sore thumb in my New York law firm until someone offered me a drink and I said 'no thanks'."

The majority of LDS members are now abroad. Building a professional elite in foreign cultures may prove harder than winning success in all-American environments like Wall Street. But, interestingly, LDS is especially fast-growing in countries with dynamic economies, particularly Brazil.

In a corridor of the LDS Missionary Training Centre there’s a plaque listing the dozens of languages taught to missionaries who study there – including Cebuano, Hmong and Tagalog. Next to it is a world map showing the countries in which the church operates, highlighted in bright colours. Only China and a handful of Middle-Eastern states remain grey. The last century saw a Mormon conquest in America. During our lifetimes, we may see the rest of the world follow, too.

*James Crabtree is the FT’s comment editor*

*Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2010. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.*