RUSSELL PRATT knocked on the door of Apartment 18A, delivering a firm, fearless rap that echoed down the dim, graffiti-scarred corridors of the Taft Houses in East Harlem. When the door finally opened a crack, he found himself facing a snarling dog and a leery, unwelcoming glare.

"Good morning, sir," Mr. Pratt said as the man sized up his white shirt sleeves, charcoal trousers and dark tie, which made him look like an insurance salesman or an investigator from the Internal Revenue Service. Pointing to the plastic name tag on his breast pocket that read "Elder Pratt," the 22-year-old missionary from Tooele, Utah, flashed an eager smile.

"I'm from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," he told the man, "and I was wondering if . . ."

The door slammed shut. Mr. Pratt stifled a wince, uttered a cheery "Bless you," and moved on to the next apartment.

And so it went on a recent Wednesday as Mr. Pratt and his partner, Shon Denning, worked their way through the housing projects and tenements of El Barrio. In their effort to draw converts to Mormonism, one of the nation's fastest-growing religions, they have become inured to curious stares, cold indifference and the occasional unkind word.

"This is New York City," Mr. Pratt said, taking a quick lunch break in his 12-hour-a-day proselytizing routine. "You expect people here to be a little suspicious."

Still, despite a spate of morning rejections, the two found their way into a half-dozen apartments that day, secured a handful of follow-up appointments and returned to their East 110th Street apartment that night with eight fewer copies of the Book of Mormon, which they had given to anyone who showed a glimmer of interest. A crossing guard, a nurse's aide and an unemployed handyman were among those who allowed the men into their homes.

"It's amazing how many people will listen to us," said Mr. Denning, 21, his cheeks burnished red from a long day in the sun. "New Yorkers are hungry for what we have to offer."

The Mormon Church, based in Salt Lake City, has found New York fertile ground for new converts, doubling its membership to 20,000 since 1988. To accommodate the city's growing congregations, the church built a sparkling $8 million meeting house just off the Grand Concourse in Kingsbridge, the Bronx, last year. Another is under construction in Inwood, and a recently formed branch that meets at Sylvia's restaurant in Harlem is scouring that neighborhood for larger quarters. Last month, the president and prophet of the Mormon Church, Gordon B. Hinckley, filled all 24,000 seats in Madison Square Garden for a "fireside chat."

"It's amazing what's happening in this city," said Ronald A. Rasband, who oversees 240 unpaid missionaries in New York, most of them men between 19 and 23 years old. "We are a church on the rise."

Worldwide, the church has grown to 10 million members, up from four million in 1978. Most of that growth has taken place beyond Utah, where Mormonism has long had a powerful presence. "We're growing so fast, we have to build a meeting house a day just to keep up," Mr. Rasband said.

Church officials and non-Mormons who study the church agree that the intense focus on proselytizing has helped feed this astounding growth. "The missionary system is the engine that makes this church so robust," said Gary Shepherd, a former missionary who is no longer active in the church and is now a professor of sociology at Oakland University in Rochester Hills, Mich. There are 60,000 Mormon missionaries working in 160 countries, said Michael Leonard, a church spokesman. The Roman Catholic Church, by comparison, has 6,000 missionaries around the world, according to the United States Catholic Mission Association.
What separates Mormon missionaries from those of other evangelical faiths, say those who study the church, is the generous attention they pay to potential converts, known as investigators. Missionaries make repeated home visits to investigators and encourage them to join church gatherings even before they are baptized.

"This is a church where sweet-faced boys and girls make house calls, sit down and answer your questions eye to eye," said Richard Bushman, a professor of history at Columbia University and a lifelong Mormon. "Even before you're a member, they lavish a lot of time on you, offering you a wonderful sense of community. I don't know if that's matched by any other religion."

Mormonism does especially well in New York, a place rife with alienation, instability and fractured families, said Jan Shipps, a professor of religion at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. "People whose lives are in disarray, newly arrived immigrants and those looking for a sense of community and stability are especially drawn to the church," Ms. Shipps said.

Urban converts, especially blacks, were not always so eagerly courted: Until 20 years ago, the church priesthood was closed to blacks, who, according to Mormon doctrine, carried the mark of Cain. The policy was reversed in 1978, after the president said he had a revelation.

Among Mormon men, the two-year mission is a rite of passage, one that a third accept when they reach 19. Women, who must wait until they are 21 to serve, are not encouraged as strongly as men and make up only 17 percent of the missionary force. "It's really just a reflection of the church's attitude toward gender roles," said Mr. Shepherd, who with his brother Gordon wrote "Mormon Passage: A Missionary Chronicle" (University of Illinois Press, 1998). "Women are supposed to focus on marriage and having families. And just as important, they cannot hold the priesthood, which makes them unable to perform critical church functions like baptisms and confirmations."

Although church officials say there is no pressure to win converts, many missionaries say that those with a prodigious tally can expect a hero's welcome upon their return home and promotions in the church hierarchy. Mr. Shepherd said the average missionary converts five to seven people a year.

The church does not release figures on the number of missionaries who fail to complete their assignments. Mr. Rasband says that except for those who became ill, none of his charges have left early. Mr. Shepherd estimated a dropout rate of 5 percent worldwide based on his research. "Coming home early would leave you seriously stigmatized," he said. "It would probably result in you leaving the church."

Long Hours, No Pay, Little Drawer Space

Like missionaries around the world, Shon Denning and Russell Pratt start their day at 6:30 A.M. They have an hour to shower, dress and eat breakfast, followed by two hours studying church teachings. At 9:30 A.M., they start their core task: proselytizing on the Upper East Side and in East Harlem.

Their day ends 12 hours later when they return to the one-bedroom apartment they share with another team of missionaries. All four men sleep in bunk beds. Their only personal space consists of two dresser drawers each.

There is not much on the walls of the fifth-floor walk-up: portraits of Jesus Christ, bus and subway maps, a battered taxi license plate and a photo of President Hinckley. A tattered sofa, its armrests worn to the wooden frame, sits in the living room. One wall is lined with copies of the Book of Mormon and videocassettes with titles like "Family First" and "Together Forever," a reference to the Mormon belief that family relationships persist after death.

Missionaries receive no salary and are expected to pay all expenses other than the cost of their return flight home. They are allowed $200 a month spending money, $80 of which is used for transportation. "We eat a lot of ramen noodles, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and we walk a heck of a lot," said Mr. Denning, who has worn out four pairs of shoes since his arrival.

To save money, he and his roommates cut one another's hair and most days pack a lunch. At home, they eat out of plastic bowls. Like other missionaries in New York, they rarely dine out. A visit to a pizza parlor is a treat.

Missionaries operate in pairs, inseparable units known as "companionships." Even when Mr. Denning walks down the five flights of stairs to let a visitor into the East Harlem building where he lives, Mr. Pratt is invariably by his side. Mormon officials say that companionships are intended to insure safety, reduce the likelihood of slipping into temptation and act as a firewall against "false accusers," who might claim that a missionary has behaved inappropriately.

Companionships are shuffled over the course of the two-year mission; new arrivals are often paired with veterans, and those...
having difficulty are sometimes placed with those whose faith and devotion are deemed unshakable.

Missionary life is strictly defined by church rules and can be grueling. Like all Mormons in good standing, missionaries do not smoke or drink alcohol, coffee, tea or caffeinated beverages. Dating, masturbation and premarital sex are forbidden. Television, popular music, magazines and unapproved books are off limits.

Communication with family is restricted to a weekly letter and two phone calls a year, on Christmas and Mother's Day. Church officials say too much contact with family distracts missionaries from their work. "Ours is a very demanding religion," said Mr. Rasband, the mission president, who conducts regular interviews with missionaries to make sure they have not strayed. "I am constantly warning them against temptation, to look away when a half-naked woman passes them on the street, to avoid being pulled in by newspaper stands that display pornographic material. In a place like New York, the distractions are endless."

To hear them tell it, Shon Denning and Russell Pratt have so far resisted New York's bountiful lures. "For me it's easy," said Mr. Denning, one of eight children who grew up in a predominantly Mormon community in rural Idaho. "My love of the Lord is so strong, nothing can knock me off course."

Like many Rocky Mountain Mormons, Mr. Denning's ancestors migrated west on the Great Exodus of 1847, when thousands, fleeing persecution in Illinois, crossed the plains in wagon trains and settled in the Salt Lake Valley.

As a child, Mr. Denning said, he never planned to become a missionary, but one day during a religion class at Ricks College, a Mormon school near his home, he received a revelation, "a burning in my bosom." He dropped out of school, sold his car and went through a month of round-the-clock instruction at the church's Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah. His high school sweetheart, also a Mormon, was thrilled. "She said she would wait for me to come back," he said. "But unfortunately she married someone else last year."

Missionaries have no choice of where they are sent; church leaders say they make assignments largely on the basis of inspiration. Mr. Denning's parents were worried at first about his placement in New York. "We heard all the bad stories, but took comfort in knowing that the Lord would look after him," said his father, Michael, who owns a company that installs water pumps. "Frankly, we were just tickled with his decision to serve, to bring something good into people's lives."

When he returns to Idaho Falls on Wednesday, Mr. Denning is likely to be praised. During his two years in New York, he baptized 15 people, among them a Bolivian couple in Harlem, a family of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Bronx and a 27-year-old Upper East Side man who works as a production assistant on feature films.

With his blond hair and cherubic face, Mr. Denning stands out on the streets of East Harlem. Like most missionaries, he says local residents always treat him with respect.

"There are places I've felt safe as a missionary that I probably wouldn't return to as a tourist," he said. A beatific smile almost always adorns his face and, when preaching, he frequently offers heartfelt testimony to his faith. "I know the Book of Mormon is true," he says, his piercing blue eyes locked on those of his prospect. "I know that this is the true church."

Dreams of Returning To 'Electric' New York

Many Mormons spend their adolescence saving for a mission. Russell Pratt spent his youth training to become a professional baseball player. As soon as the sun came up, his mother, Anne, would start feeding the batting machine in the family's backyard for her six sons.

"The first thing the neighbors hear in the morning is the ping ping of the bat hitting balls," she said. But during Russell's junior year at the University of Utah, his baseball plans were scotched by a coach who told him he would never make it to the major leagues.

"When I realized my dreams weren't going to come true, the foundation of my life had been taken out from under me," Mr. Pratt recalled. Confused and dispirited, he turned to the church. Other family members were devout, Mr. Pratt said, but until then he had never read the Book of Mormon. "The church helped me realize there is more to life than baseball."

Although Mr. Pratt says that preaching the gospel has given his life meaning, he admits to feeling an occasional tinge of doubt. "When that happens, I pray and my testimony is renewed," he said.

Mr. Pratt seems to be far more attracted to the city than Mr. Denning, who says he will probably remain in Idaho to raise a family. Mr. Pratt wants to come back to New York after he completes his mission in September and returns to Utah to finish
college. "This place is so electric," he said last week as he walked through midtown, offering opinions on modern architecture ("Some of these buildings are so faceless"), Latin cuisine ("They fry everything!") and pet owners ("How can they keep dogs in such tiny apartments?").

"I just love the diversity of people here," Mr. Pratt said. "You'd never get bored."

Like their fellow missionaries, he and Mr. Denning have had few opportunities to savor local culture. Socializing with non-Mormons is discouraged, and their strict schedule and budget leave little time or money for leisure activities. Their only luxury is a meal at the home of local church members, who are encouraged to feed cash-strapped missionaries whenever possible.

"It gets to the point that you don't even think about the things you're missing," Mr. Pratt said. "But when I come back, I'm going to jump all over this city."

There was little time to think about the future last Monday as the pair preached and proselytized their way from the forlorn projects along First Avenue to the staid brick fortresses of Park Avenue. Because doormen and intercoms keep them out of many buildings, their most fruitful contacts are people who have called the church's toll-free number requesting a free video cassette offered through television commercials. The advertisements, which often run late at night, feature uplifting vignettes about family values.

When Charlotte V. Vogt called the number last January, she assumed that the video would arrive in the mail. Instead, Mr. Denning and Mr. Pratt left several messages on her answering machine, which she ignored. A few days later, they showed up at her white-brick doorman building on East 57th Street. She told them she was too busy to talk, but they came back.

"I'm glad they did," Mrs. Vogt said. "I believe they saved my life."

She said a recent separation from her husband had left her reeling. "I was so traumatized, so without hope," she said, sitting on a plush floral couch as a Bach concerto filled her living room. But the half-dozen visits and daily phone calls from the missionaries, she said, helped ease her depression. "I've called other churches, but they just sent their literature," she said.

When the missionaries stopped by on Monday afternoon, Mrs. Vogt beamed as she described her baptism the previous week. "I was soaking wet and giddy with joy," she said, as she served the men orange juice in highball glasses monogrammed with her husband's initials.

Now that she has been confirmed, Mrs. Vogt will receive weekly visits from church members, who will teach her Mormon doctrine and history. Every Sunday, she attends services at the church's Lincoln Center chapel. Eventually, she hopes to receive a calling to become a home teacher.

"I feel like it's the beginning of a new life," she said. "I've finally found a community that really cares about me."

'There Is No Gray Area'

No one forced Aubyn Gwinn to become a missionary, but as a young Mormon growing up in Salt Lake City, Mr. Gwinn said, the alternative was grim. Among devout Mormons, he said, the pressure to serve a mission is intense, and those who don't can find themselves on the fringes of Mormon life.

"It would jeopardize your career in the church, put a wedge between you and your friends and make it difficult to get married," he said. "When you meet Mormon girls, the first thing they ask is, 'Where did you serve your mission?' If you didn't, they won't even date you."

By his own account, Mr. Gwinn was "a rock," a stalwart believer and a zealous missionary. During the two years he spent in Finland, he supervised other missionaries and helped make 10 conversions, a considerable achievement in a country known among Mormons as especially impervious to their preachings.

After returning home, Mr. Gwinn enrolled in the church-run Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. He married, had two daughters and became a member of the church's unpaid priesthood. And he tithed, giving 10 percent of his income to the church.

But at 25, he started having doubts about the church. They intensified after he moved to New York City with his family to take a job at an advertising agency, and found himself among non-Mormons. His faith began to crumble, and he eventually fell away from the church. He and his wife eventually divorced; she, too, has since left the church.
In Mormonism, Mr. Gwinn said, "You either believe everything or nothing: there is no gray area."

His twin brother, Todd Gwinn, may have lacked Aubyn's youthful ardor, yet he felt compelled to follow his lead. He was assigned to Ontario, Canada, but halfway through his mission, he said, he lost the fire.

"I wanted to belong so badly that I convinced myself to believe," he said. "I knew that if I questioned the church, I would end up as an apostate." He said he became particularly disillusioned when he discovered that some missionaries were enticing potential converts by offering access to the church's generous welfare program. Several years later, he rejected Mormonism. He also divorced the Mormon woman he had married. She, too, has since left the church, he said.

Like other lapsed Mormons, the Gwinns say that church officials make it difficult to leave the fold. They say that bishops ask relatives to apply pressure to those who try to leave, and that missionaries try to track down so-called inactives. "They feel especially threatened by anyone who wants out," Todd said.

The brothers, now 38, say separation from the church has left them with a mix of bitterness and longing. Aubyn, a creative director for a cosmetics company, wonders how he might have better used the time he spent as a missionary. Still, he is bothered by the spiritual void that nags him from time to time. "It's that hunger for something bigger than yourself, that magical spiritual life, that belief in immortality," he said.

Todd, a librarian in the Bronx, says he, too, has some regrets, though he is relieved to be free of the church's constraints. "What I miss most is the loss of community," he said. "That's something I have yet to replace." ANDREW JACOBS

PRIMER

The Roots Of Mormonism

Mormonism was founded in 1830 by Joseph Smith of Palmyra, N.Y., who claimed that when he was 14, he was visited by God and Jesus Christ who told him to form a new church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

At the heart of the religion is The Book of Mormon, a religious and secular history of the inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere from about 2200 B.C. to 421 A.D. Mormons believe that Mr. Smith translated the book from ancient from ancient gold tablets he is said to have found on a hillside in Palmyra. The book proclaims that after he was crucified, Christ appeared in North America and ministered to its inhabitants, believed to be descendents of immigrants from Jerusalem and the Tower of Babel.

Mormons hold that theirs is the only true Christian faith. Through proxy, they baptize the dead, whom they believe were denied an opportunity to join the church. The Book of Mormon states that God dwells on a planet, Kolob, with his many wives and countless spirit children, whom He sends to Earth as humans to be tested. Marriage and family relationships, they believe, persist for eternity. Polygamy, once an accepted tenet of Mormonism, was overturned in 1890. ANDREW JACOBS

Photos: "This is New York City," said Russell Pratt, right, with his Mormon missionary partner, Shon Denning, in East Harlem. "You expect people here to be a little suspicious." (Angel Franco/The New York Times)(pg. 1); Personal space is tight in the apartment shared by (left to right) Shon Denning, Russell Pratt, Afe Langi and Nathan Van Noy. "It's amazing how many people will listen to us," said Shon Denning (left). (Photographs by Angel Franco/The New York Times); Aubyn Gwinn, left, and his brother, Todd, quit the Mormon Church. (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times)(pg. 12) Chart: "GLOSSARY: From the Mouths Of Missionaries" Some terms of Mormon missionaries: TRACTING -- Proselytizing door FEARLESSING -- Street proselytizing. DINGER -- Unapproved leave from one's assigned mission. JACK MORMON -- A Mormon no longer in good standing. MOTABS -- Short for Mormon Tabernacle Choir G's -- Sacred undergarments worn by Mormons in belief that they protect them from harm. TRUNKIE -- Homesick missionary on the verge of packing his bags. DUNKED -- Baptized. (pg. 12) Graph: "MEMBERSHIP: The Conversion Factor" The number of Mormon Church members in New York has more than doubled in seven years, almost entirely because of people who have converted to the faith. Many new members were first approached about converting by one of the missionaries assigned to the city, who now number 240. 1940 -- 1,708 1950 -- 2,002 1960 -- 2,627 1970 -- 3,862 1980 -- 5,063 1990 -- 8,648 1997 -- 20,123 (Source: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints)(pg. 1)