



April 2022

The Mission

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2022) "The Mission," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.01.010>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss1/10>

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The Mission

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Mission* (2022), directed by Tania Anderson.

Keywords

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Mormons, Missionaries

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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservativism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



The Mission (2022), dir. Tania Anderson

This documentary follows several Mormon missionaries from Utah as they travel to Finland for their two-year mission. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints are required to go on such a mission under the Church's direction, and teenagers undertake this task with trepidation but also seriousness and faith. This film is one of the best efforts to document their struggles as well as their successes, and it demonstrates the function this mission performs for them in their own faith development.

The task seems daunting, as these young people do not even know Finnish, but they begin to learn it as part of their 14-week training at the Mission Training Center in Provo. They have said good-bye to their families, and will only be allowed to speak to them once each week for the next two years. The young people memorize set phrases about their faith in preparation for

stopping people on the street, and we see some of these awkward encounters in Finland with disinterested passersby, as the missionaries struggle with the language. It is hard to believe that they will gain enough language skills to convert anyone, and yet they do lead some to baptism in their time there—perhaps because those who convert seem to already know English better than the missionaries know Finnish.

The challenges are great, however, not only because they may feel they are not reaching enough people but also because they move often and switch companions every nine weeks. They follow a rigorous schedule for sleep, meals, prayer, study, and door-knocking which keeps them busy although they do get lonely and homesick. They admit to having doubts, but most of them say that their faith is being made stronger by this challenge. One family invites them into their house and respects their faith, but says they do not need to convert to be happy; do the missionaries then believe they are going to Hell? The young missionary answers that she does not condemn them, but she believes the Book of Mormon and the Bible help people come more easily to God in Heaven, and this faith also leads to a fulfilling life on Earth. They generally do not deal with the most difficult questions raised by Mormonism, and perhaps are not expected to do so. They seem to feel satisfied with their efforts, and by the end of the two years return to Utah with a secure belief in the truth of their religion.

One Church leader tells the young people that this mission is as much for their own faith as those they may have converted, and this is an honest admission that one purpose of these missions is to secure the loyalty of these young Mormons to the Church. Not all young Mormons go on these missions; one young woman has brothers who feel distant from the Church, including one who has come out as gay, which is not accepted in the Church. Another young man goes on the mission but cannot complete it due to mental health issues regarding anxiety and depression.

Even he, however, feels close to God, and the Church leader tells him that he should not feel like a failure in God's eyes for not having completed his two years.

There is little in this documentary about the differences between Mormonism and the more conservative denominations of Christianity who also seek converts. There is one discussion among the missionaries about a potential convert who hesitates due to his inability to give up drinking coffee at work, due to peer pressure: they say that this is his time to show courage and testify. It is odd for a non-Mormon to hear of giving up coffee as a faith issue, but this is symbolic, in the same way that other religions perform actions that signify their identity and commitment. They also discuss the belief that Jesus came to the Americas, and Joseph Smith as a prophet, which creates some skepticism among their listeners. Overall, however, the impression is one of clean-cut kids from supportive families who have complete faith in what they are sharing, and this mission does prepare them to return home and begin their adult lives in their communities.

It is rare for non-Mormons to have access to this much of Mormon life, and the young missionaries have shared their struggles with the filmmaker with honesty and humor. It is good to have this portrait of a religion that has guarded itself from public scrutiny, even if the more problematic elements of their faith are not here on display, as the purpose of the film is clearly to present their own experience with empathy and understanding. Director Tania Anderson has succeeded admirably in this task, and has created a fine ethnographic record of this religious community.