



A daguerreotype depicting Joseph Smith created in 1843. Smith was the founder of Latter Day Saint Movement.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Considered by some sociologists to be a contender for the newest major world religion, but denigrated by others, including some Evangelical Christians, as merely a cult, the socially and politically conservative Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long been antagonistic to the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

Not only are queer Mormons excluded from the religion's bright promise of eternal family bliss, but, over the past two decades, a substantial portion of the wealth and power of the LDS Church has been used to oppose gay rights legislation and support anti-gay initiatives and candidates.

As for gay men and lesbians within the Church, official Mormon response has varied from excommunication to requiring "reparative therapy," with more liberal elements calling for acceptance of gay men and lesbians who manage, through prayer and fasting, to overcome their homosexual desires and remain celibate for life.

However, in spite of attacks from their Church, queer Mormons do exist, both inside and outside the official Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Some are closeted, hiding their identities while continuing to attend and even rise to leadership positions within the Church. Some have formed more open-minded (and unsanctioned) sects, such as the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ, in which they attempt to reformulate the aspects of Mormonism that they find spiritually nurturing. Still others have totally rejected the Church, defining themselves as "recovering Mormons" who must work to heal the damage done to their self-esteem by a religious dogma that demonizes gay and lesbian identity.

History and Beliefs

Headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is by far the largest denomination that originated from the Latter Day Saint Movement founded by Joseph Smith (1805-1844) in 1830. The Church claims approximately 13 million members worldwide, with about half those numbers in the United States and Canada. Organized complexly and hierarchically, it is governed by a small and secretive group of men, the Melchizedek Priesthood, the President of which is the President of the Church.

The "Mormon belt" stretches from Colorado to Hawaii and from Canada into Mexico. In these areas where large populations of LDS members reside, including Utah and Idaho, the Church exerts tremendous political and economic influence. While the Church attempts to keep its assets and political maneuvering out of the public eye, some analysts estimate that it may control as much as \$30 billion.

The Church traces its origins to a small but passionate sect led by Smith, who grew up in the town of Palmyra in western New York state, part of the "burnt-over" district, so called because of the local evangelical religious fervor.

According to Mormon teachings, Smith was only fifteen years old when he had his first religious vision, a

visitation by God and Jesus who told him that he was destined to found the only true church. Further visits revealed a set of ancient writings that Smith was directed to translate into pseudo-Elizabethan English. Among these writings is the Book of Mormon, named after one of the angels from whom Smith claimed to have received his revelations.

The Mormon holy books--the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price--lay out the basic tenets of the religion, including an historical background, which involves an ancient civilization on the American continents begun around 600 B.C.E. by Jewish immigrants from Jerusalem. Jesus supposedly visited the Americas soon after his Crucifixion and Resurrection and converted this "lost tribe" of Israel. The LDS Church supposes that the tribes of native people who inhabited North and South America before the arrival of European conquerors are the last remaining descendants of these ancient Middle Eastern people.

Mormons consider themselves to be Christians, but see themselves as separate from the Catholic or Protestant traditions. The Church is sometimes described as a Restorationist organization, because it teaches that there was a Great Apostasy, and that it is the only true restoration of the original Christian Church organized by Christ. Thus, Jesus is viewed as the head of the Church, leading it through periodic revelations to a small hierarchy of priestly leaders. The highest-ranking leader, the President of the Church, is considered a prophet and an apostle.

Latter-day Saints believe in the divine authority of the Old Testament and New Testament, as far as they are translated correctly, but they also believe the revelation is completed in the additional books of their scriptural canon.

Like other Christians, Mormons believe that Jesus is the son of God and the virgin Mary. They believe that he lived a sinless life, and that his Crucifixion was an atonement for the sins of humanity. They also believe in Jesus's literal bodily resurrection, and that he currently sits on the right hand of God the Father, with whom he is united, but does not literally share his "substance."

The Church differs from other Christian denominations by its practice of temple ceremonies, including baptism for the dead and the Endowment (symbolic acts and gestures, among which are words and tokens needed to pass by angels guarding the way to heaven), its doctrinal views on the Godhead, and its former practice of plural marriage.

A central belief of Mormonism is the primacy of the family. The Church in 1995 declared that "The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity."

An unapologetically patriarchal organization, the Church believes that "By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children."

The Mormon vision of an eternal patriarchal family, whose members are reunited in the Kingdom of Glory, leads to such related doctrines as the baptism of the dead, in which believers perform proxy baptisms on behalf of their ancestors. The Church's famous commitment to genealogical history is directly related to this practice. The primary purpose of "family history work" is to obtain names and other genealogical information so that temple ordinances can be performed on behalf of deceased ancestors.

Proselytizing and Tithing

The Church's success is probably due to its emphasis on proselytizing and on tithing. True to his upbringing in a center of evangelical zeal, Smith gave missionary work an important place in his new religion. As early as 1830, missionaries began traveling to proselytize.

As the Church grew over the next century, it not only gained millions of members in nations around the world, but also amassed a large fortune, due in part to the practice of "tithing," where members donate ten percent of their income to the Church. Its inculcation of qualities such as self-reliance and frugality, and its celebration of a pioneering tradition, also has undoubtedly contributed to its wealth.

Today, young men between the ages of 19 and 25 who meet minimum standards of worthiness and preparation are encouraged to serve a two-year, full-time proselytizing mission. Women who desire to serve a mission must be at least 21 and generally serve 18-month missions. Retired married couples are also encouraged to serve missions of from three to 36 months.

Currently, approximately 53,000 proselytizing missionaries are serving throughout the world. In addition, about 3,500 Mormon missionaries are on special assignment, serving as health care specialists, craftsmen, artisans, construction supervisors, agricultural experts, and educators in developing countries.

Discrimination, Harassment, Controversy

In the 1830s, Smith gained many followers, but his new religion also made many enemies. His radical rejection of other Christian sects, his claim to be the leader of the one true church, and the eccentric beliefs of Mormonism, especially the right of men to marry several women (Smith himself had thirty wives), aroused tremendous opposition.

Fleeing harassment in New York, Smith moved his Church, first to Ohio, then to Missouri. In 1838, the governor of Missouri issued a decree, popularly called the "Order of Extermination," declaring that Mormons must be driven from the state. Smith fled once again to Illinois, where he was killed by a mob in 1844.

In 1846, Brigham Young, Smith's successor as head of the LDS Church, took an expedition of pioneering Mormons to the far-off western territory of Utah, hoping to practice their religion there without interference.

Though they sought religious tolerance, the members of the growing church were themselves frequently accused of acts of bigotry and violence, including an 1857 massacre where Mormons killed every man, woman, and older child on a passing Arkansas wagon train, sparing only the youngest children for conversion to the LDS Church.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints practiced plural marriages. However, repeated refusals--six between 1849 and 1887--by the United States Congress to admit Utah into statehood made it clear that as long as polygamy was tolerated in the territory, it would never become a state. In 1890, as the government was about to seize the assets of the Church, the President of the Church received a revelation from God: the "Great Accommodation" that suspended the practice of polygamy. On January 4, 1896, Utah became the 45th state in the union.

In 1904, the Church officially prohibited plural marriages world-wide. However, polygamy is still practiced by some Mormons, especially those who belong to smaller sects, most of which also profess a deep belief in an eternal family, which begins with the God-ordained marriage of a man and woman, and continues even after death.

Another controversial issue within the LDS Church has been charges of racism. The Church teaches that

black people are descendants of Cain, who killed his brother Abel, and of Ham, who was a slave. They bear the "mark of Cain" as a curse upon them. Until 1978, black men were not allowed to become LDS priests, even in the Aaronic Priesthood, which is the lowest rung of the hierarchy, to which males are generally admitted at the age of 16.

The Mormon holy book The Pearl of Great Price explicitly prohibits the admission of blacks, including someone who has a distant ancestor who was black, to the Priesthood, and several passages of The Book of Mormon are self-evidently racist. Moreover, Church leaders routinely made racist pronouncements as late as the 1950s and 1960s.

However, the racist policies and pronouncements of the Church came under concerted challenge during the 1960s and 1970s. Sports groups threatened to cancel athletic competitions against Brigham Young University and anti-racist religious groups promoted boycotts of Church businesses and Utah tourism.

In the face of this pressure, LDS leaders announced that they had received a revelation from God. On June 6, 1978, the prohibition against the admission of black males to the priesthood was lifted.

Mormons and Homosexuality

Homosexuality is not mentioned in the uniquely Mormon holy books, and there is some evidence that Joseph Smith himself was accepting of same-sex sexual relationships. Moreover, Church President Joseph F. Smith (1899-1964) allegedly engaged in homosexual relationships, and so may have Evan Stephens (1854-1930), director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and author of many Church hymns. According to a recent book by D. Michael Quinn, the Church accommodated homosexuality until the 1950s.

In the 1950s, however, the LDS Church embarked on an anti-homosexual crusade that reflected the McCarthy-era hysteria regarding homosexuality. Not only did the Church vigorously reiterate its prohibition against same-sex sexual activity and depict homosexuals as moral lepers, but it also adopted the view that homosexuality was the result of faulty parenting and, in effect, blamed parents for the homosexuality of their children.

Pamphlets published by the Church from the 1950s through the 1970s routinely described homosexuality as abnormal, as a perversion, and as a sin worse than incest or murder. Some in effect justified gay bashing. A President of the Church is reported to have said of homosexuals that "it were better that such a man were never born."

More recently, however, Church policy toward homosexuality has shifted slightly. Now statements about homosexuality and homosexuals are more likely to be cloaked in a veneer of compassion; bald statements of condemnation are rare. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has, in effect, adopted a policy similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church in which orientation is ostensibly regarded as neutral, but homosexual acts are considered evil. Hence, the Church now does not excommunicate individuals with a homosexual orientation if they do not act on their homosexual desires.

In 1998, President of the Church Gordon B. Hinckley issued this statement: "People inquire about our position on those who consider themselves so-called gays and lesbians. My response is that we love them as sons and daughters of God. They may have certain inclinations which are powerful and which may be difficult to control. . . . If they do not act upon these inclinations, then they can go forward as do all other members of the Church. If they violate the law of chastity and the moral standards of the Church, then they are subject to the discipline of the Church, just as others are."

However, in a religious community that values stereotypical gender roles and large families with many children, even celibate gay men and lesbians have limited acceptance. As often occurs in patriarchal cultures where women are largely invisible, gay men face more direct persecution within LDS society, while

lesbians can often remain more easily closeted.

Transgender people also challenge strict Mormon notions of gender roles, and Church leaders have condemned sex reassignment surgery.

The Church has resisted the idea that sexual orientation may be genetic or otherwise hard-wired. Leaders frequently describe homosexuality as a "chosen lifestyle." The Church believes that through repentance, prayer, and fasting homosexuals may develop heterosexual desires.

Evergreen International, a nonprofit group organized in 1989 around Mormon principles, but not officially connected to the Church, offers a number of programs, including the invasive "reparative therapy," to help gay men and lesbians overcome their same-sex attraction, or at least to resist the urge to act upon it.

Anti-Gay Political Activities

The Church's glorification of the patriarchally-defined heterosexual family unit has made it a powerful enemy of gay rights and feminism. It is not coincidental that the Mormon Church first flexed its political muscles nationally in their successful campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. The ERA, which would have guaranteed equal rights to women, was vigorously opposed by the Church. LDS President Spencer Kimball condemned the Amendment on the grounds that if it were approved, it would lead to laws that would extend equal rights to gay men and lesbians.

Though the LDS Church prefers to keep its political and financial activities undercover, it has participated in a number of anti-gay campaigns. One of the first occurred during the early 1990s in Hawaii, when the Church spent at least \$600,000 in support of the referendum to amend the state constitution to forbid same-sex marriage. Later in the decade, hundreds of thousands of LDS dollars went to promote a similar amendment of the state constitution of Alaska as well.

More recently, the Church has supported both the attempt to amend the Constitution of the United States to forbid same-sex marriage and numerous state referenda and legislation that would outlaw same-sex marriage and limit gay rights.

The Church is also suspected of supporting individual candidates who oppose gay rights, fomenting opposition to gay-straight alliances in public schools, lobbying against hate crime legislation, and otherwise attacking the glbtq movement for equality.

Although most of its political positions are similar to those of the so-called religious right, Mormons occupy an ambiguous position in that coalition, since most Evangelical Christians regard them as suspect in various ways, some even declaring that Mormons are not really Christian at all.

Indeed, the Church's decision to become so prominently involved in the successful effort to pass California's 2008 Proposition 8, the initiative to repeal the right of same-sex couples to marry, may have been at least partially motivated by a desire to win the respect of other members of the religious coalition opposed to equal rights for homosexuals, including the Roman Catholic Church and numerous Evangelical denominations.

In any event, the participation of Mormons in the campaign on behalf of Proposition 8 was pivotal to the success of the initiative. At the behest of the Church, members are estimated to have contributed as much as \$20 million to the campaign and to have served as the most conspicuous "foot soldiers" in the effort.

In response to the passage of Proposition 8, many members of the glbtq community targeted Mormon

churches for protests and others called for boycotts of businesses owned by contributors to the campaign on behalf of Proposition 8.

In addition, Fred Karger, founder of a group called Californians Against Hate, filed a complaint against the Church with the Fair Political Practices Commission of California, alleging that the Mormon Church provided significant contributions to the pro-Proposition 8 campaign that it did not report, as required by state law, including commercials, phone banks, and websites. Other activists circulated petitions calling for the Internal Revenue Service to revoke the Church's tax-exempt status for its blatant participation in political activities.

Queer Mormons

In spite of all the religious, social, and political pressure that the Church exerts against them, queer Mormons do exist, though often in painful relation to the Church and their own families. The Church's elevation of the family unit and its emphasis on procreation frequently make glbtq members feel like pariahs. These policies often cause parents to reject their gay and lesbian children or to feel responsible for their "perversion."

In 2000, David Hardy, a Salt Lake City attorney and former LDS Bishop, and the father of a gay child, accused the Church of "engendering fear and loathing" toward gay men and lesbians and of "destroying real families" by driving "our gay children to self-loathing, despair and suicide."

In response to the rejection they feel, glbtq Mormons have come together in a variety of support groups. One of the largest, Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, got its start during the 1970s in response to a perceived increase in the number of suicides among gay and lesbian Mormons. Originating from small groups of gay Mormons who had been meeting quietly since 1962 in Salt Lake City, Los Angeles, and at Brigham Young University, Affirmation was founded by activists such as Matthew Price and Paul Martenson, who began to challenge the notion that queerness is inherently sinful.

Affirmation describes its mission as follows: "Its purpose is to provide a supportive environment for relieving the needless fear, guilt, self-oppression and isolation that LDS gays and lesbians can experience in an era where willful ignorance about human sexuality is too often a reality. We believe that a same-gender orientation and same-gender relationships can be consistent with and supported by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We affirm that we are children of Heavenly Parents who love us the way they created us and will judge us, as they do all, based on what we make of our lives here and how we have treated our sisters and brothers."

On its website, Affirmation declares that "We are an organization of people who believe in the worth of every soul regardless of their sexual or gender orientation. We rejoice in life. We reject the tyranny that would have us believe that who we are--gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender--is evil. We view our sexual and gender orientation as a blessing, not a curse. Although many of us are no longer members of the LDS Church we celebrate being part of the great Mormon tradition."

Affinity, Affirmation's newsletter, began publication in 1980. By the early 2000s Affirmation counted around three hundred official members, with hundreds more still in the closet.

In 1979, a gay Mormon presence appeared for the first time in the Los Angeles Pride parade, and in September of that year, a gay Mormon contingent joined the Washington D.C. March for Gay Rights.

The Restoration Church of Jesus Christ offers another kind of support for queers who still feel connected to their religious roots. Founded in 1985 by Antonio Feliz, a former LDS Bishop, and other members of

Affirmation who had been excommunicated from the LDS Church, the RCJC professes belief in benevolent Heavenly Parents who do not condemn homosexuality.

Following a long LDS tradition of belief in personal revelation of the word of God, the RCJC have their own holy book of scripture, titled *Hidden Treasures and Promises*, accept women in all church offices, and teach that gay sexuality is not sinful in the context of a loving relationship. The Church is believed to have about 500 members, with one ward (congregation) in Salt Lake City and members in California who have not yet been organized into wards.

Other Mormons find that their negative experiences within the Church compel them to make a complete break. These ex-Mormons may gain support from such websites as <http://recoveringmormons.tribe>, <http://www.postmormon.org>, and <http://www.exmormons.com>.

E-mail lists, such as TGI Mormons and Qsaints, offer gay, lesbian, transgender, and intersex people from Mormon backgrounds a space to connect with others who understand their issues.

The response to this queer activism from the LDS Church and its more uncompromising members has been predictably negative. While the official church position is one of compassionate censure, individual incidents demonstrate an atmosphere of intolerance.

In 2004, for example, gay photographer, and ex-Mormon, Don Farmer had several prints stolen from a Salt Lake City Community College Gay Pride art show. The photos, which showed pairs of young suit-and-tie-clad Mormon missionaries in erotic poses, had enraged many in the local LDS community and had been the subject of physical altercations before the theft.

In 2007, when the Soulforce Equality Ride, a Christian youth group that travels to Christian colleges to protest discrimination against glbtq students, made a stop at Brigham Young University, they were not allowed on campus, and several protesters were arrested.

Several films and plays have explored the subject of gays and the LDS Church, including most notably Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which opened on Broadway in 1993 and was made into a Mike Nichols film in 2003, and *Latter Days*, a 2004 film directed by C. Jay Cox. Both examine LDS culture through stories of love between Mormons and non-Mormons.

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