

Mormons' uneasy relationship with LGBTQ people 1/2

BY [JAKUB JAHLJAN 18. 2023 LEAVE](#)

[A COMMENT](#)

[ON MORMONS' UNEASY RELATIONSHIP WITH LGBTQ PEOPLE 1/2](#)



In November of 2022, the largest Mormon church (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, hereafter LDS) made a surprising announcement based on debates between Utah lawmakers and leaders of the church. "We are grateful for the continued efforts of those working to ensure that the Respect for Marriage Act includes appropriate protections for religious liberty while respecting the laws and protecting the rights of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. We believe this approach is the way forward."^[1]

The decision has renewed debates about the rights of LGBTQ people in the US state of Utah and their position in the LDS church. Moreover, this topic is a hot-button issue for Mormons. For most of its history, the church has held a conservative stance toward gays and other sexual minorities, but in November it publicly endorsed a bill to protect the rights of LGBTQ people. How did this move come about, and what might it mean for the future of this church?

Who are Mormons

The term "Mormons" usually refers to followers of Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the controversial American prophet and visionary who founded the church in 1830. After his death, however, it split into several groups, the largest of which (LDS) went to the western United States and founded the state of Utah (originally Deseret). Minority Mormon churches are found in various areas. The Fundamentalists, practicing polygamy, are mostly based in the western United States and have built their own communities, while the Liberal Mormon Church (now called the Community of Christ) is based in Independence, Missouri. The total number of Mormons is estimated to be approximately 18 million (nearly 17 million of which are in the largest of the Mormon churches, the LDS, which will be the primary focus of this article).

Historical attitudes towards homosexuality

In the earliest period, the Church did not theologically address the issue of homosexuality. The views and attitudes of the leaders of this period are based primarily on a literal interpretation of the Bible, but the topic of homosexuality does not seem to have played a large role in the early church. One of the few instances was the accusation of homosexual relations by John C. Bennet (1804-1867), a close associate of Joseph Smith in the final years of his life. Apart from this case, however, Joseph Smith does not appear to have made any comments on homosexuality. There is an account of the funeral of a Mormon missionary at which Joseph Smith mentions his then homosexual partner in a tolerant vein.² Smith made similar comments about men sleeping together in bed in a loving embrace, viewing such a relationship as a strong bond. An interesting probe into intimate life between men in early Mormonism is a study by scholar Michael D. Quinn (1944-2021), who collected allegations of homosexual experimentation by Joseph Smith himself^[3].

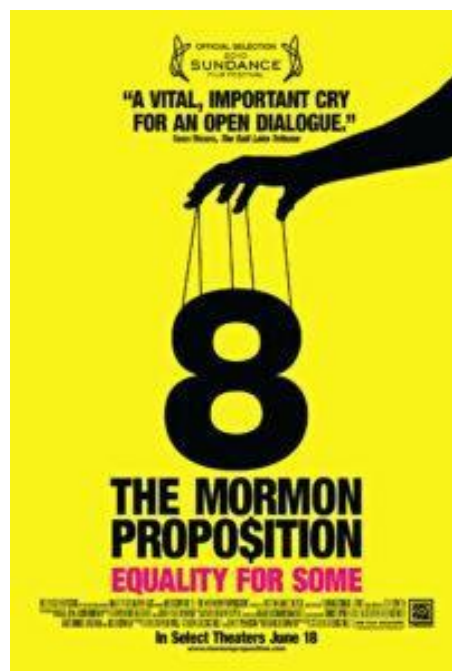
Mormon apologists, however, have argued against such interpretations, stating that the LDS Church's position has been the same from the beginning.⁴ Another study by Quinn shows that the first public Church speech condemning homosexuality was a speech by J. Reuben Clark in 1952. Indeed, it was in the 1950s and 1960s that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) began to define itself against counterculture and attempts at sexual liberalization. From this, it appears that homosexuality as a topic entered the church through the political and cultural climate of the United States after World War II. This conservative rhetoric began to appear with increasing frequency, and played a significant role in the teachings of several church leaders, most notably Spencer W. Kimball (1895-1985). The latter, for example, taught that homosexuality could be cured if the "battle" was well prepared. And it is this teaching that has led to controversy over the rights of LGBTQ people.

The war against homosexuality

In the 1950s, church leaders began to notice increased reports of homosexual contact among students at Brigham Young University (BYU), which the church founded and operates. With the permission of church leaders, so-called conversion therapy was being provided to homosexual students at BYU. If they did not attempt to cure their homosexuality, they would be expelled from the church and the school.⁵ The students (all male in all cases) therefore submitted to a series of electroshock therapies, the administration of emetics and

other substances that have been used, along with the screening of pornography, to convert homosexuals^[6].

In 1962, homosexual students were asked to leave the university to save themselves the embarrassment. In 1965, the first five gay suicides at BYU were recorded. Under the leadership of Dallin H. Oaks (b. 1932, now an LDS apostle), a program was launched in 1976 to seek out gay students and expel them if they did not want to undergo conversion therapy (Oaks now denies all allegations and denies the existence of the program). In the same year, Mormon apostle Boyd K. Packer gave a speech, "To Young Men Only," in which he describes how a missionary companion once confided in him about homosexuality, and he challenged him rather than have the companion try to seduce him into such immoral acts.^[8] The speech is now criticized and seen as an endorsement of violence against gay people. In 2000, the suicide of a BYU student who ended his life by jumping from a church building attracted media attention.^[9] The reason given was a letter BYU sent to students comparing homosexuality to zoophilia, pedophilia, and Satanism. Despite considerable controversy, the LDS continued its policies and focused its attention nationally. In 2008, it became financially and media involved in a California referendum on gay marriage and influenced the results.^[10] However, the campaign generated considerable attention, and even produced a documentary film detailing the Mormon Church's involvement.



The involvement of the church in the campaign was captured in a documentary.

Handbook on homosexuality

An interesting probe into the thinking of Mormon leaders is a booklet published in 1981 by the Prophet and the Apostles.^[11] Only some church leaders had access to this booklet, and they were required to keep its existence secret.^[12] It served the needs of bishops and other church leaders who had to deal with homosexual members. For example, one chapter deals with the causes of homosexuality and mentions dysfunctional families and poor peer relationships,

unhealthy sexual behaviour of parents or exposure to homosexuality at an early age. The Church has created categories of homosexuals such as situational homosexuals, rebellious homosexuals, and other alleged.

However inappropriate the brochure may seem, it was a significant step. It was published in the year that conversion therapy at BYU ended. The church was looking for new ways to cure gays of homosexuality, and this booklet was intended to serve the social re-education of the homosexual into the heterosexual. This attitude characterized the entire period between 1981 and 2015 when church leaders supported sexual reorientation programs. The purpose of these programs was to convince homosexual individuals to start a family with a heterosexual partner. The programs included church members testifying about the possibility of changing sexual orientation and presenting their happy lives with their wives and children. One of the main promoters of such a life was David Matheson. However, he left the church in 2019 and announced that his attempts to overcome his homosexual orientation had been unsuccessful^[13].

Change is coming

The most recent attempt by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) to maintain its stance was in 2015, when it issued a series of executive orders targeting LGBT families. For example, people who had gay parents and wanted to join the Church were forced to publicly renounce their parents' "lifestyle" and move away from them. Similarly, parents had to disown their LGBT children. These regulations, however, sparked outrage even among some traditional LDS members. In 2018, Thomas S. Monson (1927-2018), president and prophet of the church, died and was succeeded by Russell M. Nelson (b. 1924), a physician by profession. The latter was already known for advocating a more lenient approach by the church toward the LGBT minority, according to internal documents leaked to the Mormon Leaks website. With his arrival, the church made a number of internal reforms, in which, among other things, it repealed the problematic 2015 rules.¹⁵ General church reforms included a ban on guns on church property, support and assistance for immigrants from Mexico and elsewhere, support for the covid-19 vaccine, and, at the end of 2022, an agreement with Utah state legislators to protect LGBT rights.

As convoluted and often painful as the history of LGBTQ people in Mormonism has been, with recent changes, the LDS appears to be moving closer to the liberal Community of Christ, which has been supporting LGBTQ people in its church for several years and even marrying them in some parts of the world.¹⁶ Changing LDS doctrine on homosexuality is unlikely, but it is possible that the church, under the leadership of Russell M. Nelson, will join the fight against discrimination against LGBTQ people. So far, Prophet Nelson's four-year tenure has brought about a significant amount of change that is somewhat reminiscent of the actions of Pope Francis (who incidentally met with Nelson in person in 2019) in this regard, and suggests a better future for LGBTQ people in Mormon life.

The second part focuses on lesbian and trans rights.

Notes:

^[1] CHURCH of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Statement on the United States Congress Respect for Marriage Act, 15.11.2022, Church newsroom, Official statement. [Online](#).

^[2] Fordham University, Joseph Smith and Homosexuality (1843), Internet history sourcebooks project. [Online](#).

- [3] QUINN, D. Michael, Male-Male Intimacy among Nineteenth-Century Mormons: A Case Study, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1995, pp. 105-128. [Online](#).
- [4] For context, it may be necessary to mention that Quinn himself was expelled from the LDS because of his homosexuality. Hence the LDS Church's apologetic position that speaks of "Quinn's homosexual distortion" of church history: MITTON, George L., and RHETT, S. James, "Response to D. Michael Quinn's Homosexual Distortion of Latter-Day Saint History," *FARMS Review of Books*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1998, pp. 141-263. [Online](#).
- [5] *Latter Gay Stories*, BYU's electroshock documentary/gay conversion therapy program, 3/26/2020, originally released through Gentile pictures in 1996. [Online](#).
- [6] For example, see HOLLISTER, Ryan, The shocking truth: A history of gay aversion therapy at Brigham Young University, *Historian's Craft* 200, 17 Apr. 2019. [Online](#).
- [7] *Mormon stories* podcast 1505, Did Dallin H. Oaks lie about gay electroshock therapy at BYU, 11/17/2021. [Online](#).
- [8] PACKER, Boyd K., To young men only, Oct. 2, 1976, address to the clergy section of the General Conference. [Online at Latter-gay stories](#).
- [9] There is a very comprehensive and well-sourced article on the English Wikipedia called Brigham Young University LGBT history. [Online](#).
- [10] Documentary 8: The Mormon Proposition (Proposition 8) in the [CSFD database](#).
- [11] The handbook can be found [online](#) at Mormon Leaks.
- [12] The handbook was published by the Mormon Leaks Project, which publishes internal Mormon Church materials for the eyes of leaders only.
- [13] AARON, Michael, Prominent Utah Mormon ex-gay therapist affirms he is gay, Feb. 1, 2019, *Q Salt Lake*. [Online](#).
- [14] GOODSTEIN, Laurie, New policy on gay couples and their children roils Mormon church, Nov. 13, 2015, *The New York Times*. [Online](#).
- [15] WAMSLEY, Laurel, In major shift, LDS church rolls back controversial policies toward LGBT members, 4/4/2019, *NPR*. [Online](#).
- [16] The official statement of the Community of Christ on this topic can be found [online](#).

Mormons' uneasy relationship with LGBTQ people 2/2

BY JAKUB JAHL [FEBRUARY 7, 2023](#)

[LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

[ON THE UNEASY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MORMONS AND LGBTQ PEOPLE 2/2](#)



This is the second part of an article about LGBTQ rights in Mormonism. [The previous installment](#) discussed gay rights, while this article will focus on lesbian and trans rights.

AFFIRMATION
GAY & LESBIAN MORMONS



"We are grateful for the continued efforts of those working to ensure that the Respect for Marriage Act includes appropriate protections for religious liberty while respecting the laws and protecting the rights of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. We believe that this approach is the way forward."^[1] - Last November 15th's decision by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormon) renewed the debate over the rights of LGBTQ people in the U.S. state of Utah and their position

in the LDS. Moreover, this is a very hot topic for Mormons. The church has held a conservative stance toward homosexuals and other sexual minorities for most of its history, but in November it publicly endorsed a bill to protect the rights of LGBTQ people. How did this move come about, and what might it mean for the future of this church?

Who are Mormons

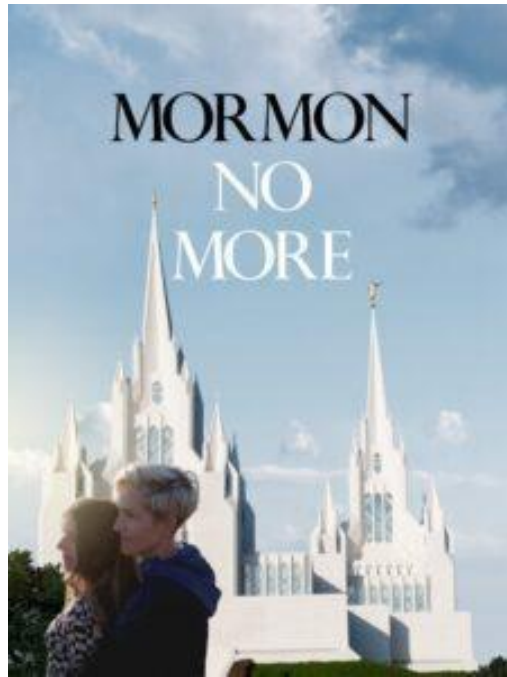
The term Mormon usually refers to the followers of Joseph Smith (1805-1844), the controversial American prophet and visionary who founded the Mormon Church in 1830. After his death, however, it split into several groups, the largest of which (LDS) went to the western United States and founded the state of Deseret (roughly equivalent to Utah today). Minority Mormon churches are found in various areas. The fundamentalist branches, practicing polygamy, are mostly based in the western United States and have built their own communities, while the more liberal and progressive Mormon Church (now called the Community of Christ) is based in Independence, Missouri. The total number of Mormons is estimated to be approximately 18 million (of which nearly 17 million are in the largest of the Mormon churches - the LDS - which is the primary focus of this article).

A Lesbian History of Mormonism

As a rule, when people talk about the Mormon Church's attitude toward the LGBTQ community, they primarily mention the Church's processes for eliminating gay men. However, not much is said about lesbian women, transgender people, and non-binary people, despite the fact that we have historical records of them even within Mormonism.

The history of lesbian relationships in Mormonism is a controversial topic that will always depend heavily on the interpretation of historical sources. However, we have preserved quite a number of examples of expressions of love between Mormon women in early Mormon history.² Some scholars (e.g., Quinn^[13]) suggest that these may have been the result of the loneliness of some polygamous women who lived only in the company of their fellow wives. The first record of a lesbian woman attempting to seduce a young girl in an LDS setting dates from 1856. In 1870, the term lesbianism first appeared in church sources as the equivalent of sodomy. In 1891, the first gay and lesbian society in Utah was founded,^[3] reportedly sponsored by Katherine Young-Schweitzer, granddaughter of the second Mormon prophet Brigham Young.

The Mormon response came about a year after the founding of the Society when the major Mormon newspaper, the Deseret News, published a series of articles about a lesbian murder in the state of Tennessee.⁴ Although the murder had nothing to do with Mormons, Mormon journalists tried to present the case as one of perverse lesbianism and its consequences. However, the early 20th century saw a weakening of these attacks, so that in 1912 a Mormon poem adoring Sappho of Lesbos even appeared. Mildred J. Berryman (1901-1972) became an important pioneer in academic research on the lesbian and gay community in Utah. She worked on research on 24 lesbian women living in Salt Lake City from 1928-1938^[5].



As noted in the previous piece, a major change in LGBT rights in Mormonism came in 1952, when the spiritual war against homosexuality in the LDS began. This approach was opposed by a number of different groups over the decades, perhaps most notably the 2013-2014 feminist initiative to push for greater rights for Mormon women, including free self-expression and the right to the female priesthood. The leader of that initiative, Kate Kelly, later divorced and disclosed her lesbian orientation. She now lives with her partner. How painful and joyful lesbian life stories can be was demonstrated brilliantly by a multi-part HBO series called [Never Again a Mormon](#).⁶ It followed the story of a lesbian couple seeking and finding reconciliation with their former spouses in the church and their (disillusioned) family members. The story shows how, with the radicalization of church rules in 2015, many family members sided with their lesbian relatives and their families. In the context of this series, the decision of the current prophet, Russell M. Nelson on the repeal of the 2015 rules much more understandable.

Trans rights among Mormons

In early Mormon history, we find no mention of transhumans or non-binary people in the true sense of the word. However, we do find examples of transvestism that point to the existence of alternative attitudes toward gender. One of the most famous cross-dressers was the son of the second Mormon prophet.



Brigham Morris Young as Pattirini.

Brigham Morris Young (1854-1931) was the thirty-fifth child of Brigham Young (his mother was the man's twenty-second wife). In early adulthood he served a mission in Hawaii and upon his return he formed the Young Men's Society. He eventually had 10 children with his wife (the daughter of the fifth Mormon prophet), but this did not prevent him from pursuing a career as a singer from 1885-1900.⁷ During these years, he regularly dressed in women's clothing and performed as the Italian artist Pattirini.⁸ The fact that he was not excommunicated during this period may indicate that LDS attitudes toward alternative sexual trends were not always clear-cut.

As indiscriminate verbal attacks on the LGBTQ minority escalated in the 20th century, trans people found some form of support only in 2006-2015, when the author of the Mormon Stories podcast, excommunicated psychologist John Dehlin (born 1969), began to focus on the stories of trans people in the Mormon Church. Kimberly Anderson was the first featured speaker,⁹ but others have followed, including young transgender people between the ages of 10 and 20. There are now a number of projects focused on trans rights in Mormon settings, particularly at Brigham Young University, where rainbow marches and protests for LGBTQ rights are regularly held.¹⁰ Some of these transgender activists are featured in the aforementioned documentary *Never Again a Mormon Woman*, and there is also a short documentary called *Transmormon*, exploring the story of one Utah trans woman¹¹.

Which way on

As convoluted and often painful as the history of LGBTQ people in Mormonism has been, with recent changes, it appears that the LDS is moving closer to the liberal Community of Christ, which has been supporting LGBTQ people in its church for several years and even marrying them in some parts of the world.¹² We can't expect a change in LDS doctrine on homosexuality anytime soon, but we can expect the church under Russell M. Nelson to work toward a better

the status of LGBTQ people. It is certainly not the change that some wanted, but it is still a rather bold move by the Mormon prophet that suggests that changes in this direction may continue. So far, Prophet Nelson's four-year tenure has brought a significant amount of change that suggests a better future for LGBTQ people's lives in Mormon settings.



The sign at Brigham Young University in Provo, which activists lit up with the colors of the transgender community as part of an event in support of LGBTQ rights. Source: [here](#).

Notes:

[1] CHURCH of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Statement on the United States Congress Respect for Marriage Act, 11/15/2022, Church newsroom, Official statement. [Online](#).

[2] JORDAN, Sara, Lesbian Mormon history, 3/31/97, Affirmation international conference in Salt Lake. [Online](#).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Mormon no more, 2022, HBO. [Online information in CSFD database](#).

[7] Galen Snow Young, Brief History of Brigham Morris Young, Department of Archives and Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

[8] Brief history of Brigham Morris Young, MSS SC 1999 at L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University. [Online](#).

[9] Mormon stories podcast 735-738, Kimberly Anderson's journey from living 45 years as a Mormon man to living openly as a woman, May 4, 2017. [Online](#).

[10] Mormon stories podcast - shows number [739. 740. 743 and many more](#).

[11] The documentary Transmormon is [publicly available on Vimeo](#).

[12] The official statement of the Community of Christ on this topic can be found [online](#).

[13] QUINN, D. Michael, Male-Male Intimacy among Nineteenth-Century Mormons: A Case Study, Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, vol. 28, no. 4, 1995, pp. 105-128. [Online](#).