

## FROM THE EDITOR

THE CHURCH FORMERLY  
KNOWN AS . . .

By Dan Wotherspoon

THROUGH A *New York Times* interview with Apostle Dallin H. Oaks,<sup>1</sup> followed by several press releases and a letter from the First Presidency read from sacrament meeting pulpits (see sidebar), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced in February 2001 that it is making a renewed effort to discourage both media and Church members from using the terms "Mormon Church," "LDS Church," or "Latter-day Saints Church." Instead, it hopes to highlight the name Jesus Christ in references to the Church. Accordingly, it suggests that first mentions should include the Church's full name, followed by "The Church of Jesus Christ" on second and subsequent references. If a still-shorter term is needed, it suggests "the Church."

When I first heard this news, I couldn't muster much enthusiasm. Its ring was too familiar: hasn't this been tried again and again? My first few discussions with friends often degenerated into one-liners and jibes about the futility of it all. The M-word, we were sure, was here to stay. Why would Church leaders waste time and potentially embarrass themselves with one more effort, as Richard and Joan Ostling write in *Mormon America*, "to make water run uphill"?

Well, since then, I have become excited about it. I've become convinced that this announcement may be heralding a shift in Church self-understanding that, if seen through a long lens, fills me with hope. Much more is going on here than just trying to manage the media or respond to the strain of "Mormons are not Christians."

For those SUNSTONE readers who may not yet be aware of the contents of the announcements and the early buzz it has generated, here are a few more details. First, clearly the leaders' primary concern is with references to the Church, not its members. We are still "Mormons." In his *Times* inter-

view, Elder Oaks said, "I don't mind being called a Mormon, but I don't want it said that I belong to the Mormon Church." Second, "Mormon" will still be used in proper names such as the Book of Mormon, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, or as an adjective in expressions such as the "Mormon pioneers." Finally, "the term 'Mormonism' is acceptable in describing the combination of doctrine, culture and lifestyle unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."<sup>2</sup>

So far, reactions to the announcements from news outlets have been mixed. A *Salt Lake Tribune* article quotes Norm Goldstein, editor of *The Associated Press Stylebook*, the word-usage guide for most U.S. newspapers: "They've sent us material before on this. We've looked at it, and then decided that since they are still generally known as Mormons, we would stay with Mormon church and then use the full name of the church on second reference." Goldstein adds that AP style changes are usually driven by issues of clarity, and "this doesn't really clarify anything." The article also gives responses from editors of several Utah newspapers and the *New York Times* to queries about their plans, if any, to change the way they refer to the Church. Their answers ranged from agreements or near-agreements to no longer use "Mormon Church," to waiting to see how it flies elsewhere, to expressing doubt about any change in their paper's policy.<sup>3</sup>

It is safe to guess that ultimately few reporters will choose to use nine or five words to refer to the Church when two will do. Still, some will comply; some stories will give the full name or use the subsequent reference suggestions—and that is all Church leaders can realistically hope for. With the 2002 Winter Olympics coming to Utah in less than a year, and given recent debates about whether Mormons are Christians, this effort will cause some reporters to ask different questions and have in mind a sense of Mormon claims about Jesus Christ.

IF we grant, and we should, that Church leaders and their advisors are not naive to the ways news organizations work and how Church members refer to themselves and their church, we must look at these announcements in terms other than simply their likelihood for large scale success. No doubt there are definite public relations and Olympics motives in these moves, but I believe we risk missing a huge piece of the puzzle if those are the only issues we focus on. I think much more is afoot than just that.

Jan Shipps has touched on a big portion of what this "more" might be. In an article for *Beliefnet.com*,<sup>4</sup> she interprets these announcements as signaling a dramatic shift in mindset, a change very similar to the rethinking the Saints were forced to make around the turn of the twentieth century when the Church abandoned the practice of plural marriage and their theocratic nation of Deseret. According to Shipps, the earliest Saints understood themselves primarily as "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2:9). They were called, literally, to be kingdom builders and citizens of a "holy nation." The problem came when this kingdom, protected much of the time by a "mountain curtain," began to crumble. Church members had to invent for themselves a new understanding of what it meant to be "Mormon."

According to Shipps, part of the transition to the new "Mormonism" was shaped by the arrival of the transcontinental railroad and the tourist boom that followed. Suddenly, instead of being "peculiar" as citizens of the kingdom of God, Church members became in many ways the peculiar inhabitants of beautiful, spectacular "Mormon land." Visitors were drawn to Utah for its natural splendor but also became intrigued by tours through the residences of Brigham's many wives and visits to the wonderful Tabernacle and various temples built by the Mormon people. These encounters with others gave birth to Mormonism, in the eyes of the nation and for the Saints themselves, as a *culture*. "Mormon" began to acquire ethnic dimensions.

With this background, Shipps interprets the announcement of the deliberate distancing of the Church from the M-word as a clear shift at Church headquarters in both direction and self-understanding: "To me, it is yet another step away from the beginnings of Mormonism, from the days when most of the Saints lived in Utah and its environs and when both the church and Mormon culture were embedded in the soil of the 'Mormon culture region.'"

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IT is understandable that Shippo would read these things through this lens. She and sociologist Rodney Stark have for years been heralds to the non-Mormon world that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is emerging as a new world religion. But her analysis prompts me to wonder if this announcement signals that Church leaders are now beginning to feel that we may actually be ready to truly *become* a global faith, rather than simply a church that happens to have members all over the world. If so, what an exciting prospect!

Is Shippo's analysis correct? Is my extension plausible? If so, is the Church as an institution ready to meet this challenge? Are we as Church members ready to begin the new thinking that such a shift would entail? Are we willing to disassemble and reassemble and mine our rich resources for new treasures and emphases in the same way the post-Manifesto Latter-day Saints did? Or do we just want to stand back and mourn how generic our theology has begun to sound in some of the recent interviews and conference addresses President Hinckley and other leaders have given? I think the former. Now, more than ever, is the time for patience and hope. This is a transition time, and there is much yet to be decided, many opportunities

for members and friends with good hearts and bright minds to speak up and help the Church be the embracing and good church it can be.

#### THE CHURCH YET TO BECOME . . .

EVEN as I express my optimism about the possibilities embedded in this potential shift, I really like being a *Mormon*—culturally, theologically, and in most every other way. I am not embarrassed by our past polygyny nor by those with Mormon heritage who practice it today. I am sorry they have been harassed and made afraid, and I hope new understandings and peaceful relations between them and the Church, Utah, and the nation will soon emerge. If they, living out of their belief system with integrity and faith, are the main reason for the Church distancing itself from the term "Mormon," I think that is wrong.

I am not embarrassed by past theologies or social experiments that have failed or have proven themselves not to be our tradition's best efforts. Even as I may question the soundness of mind behind certain decisions, I still trust in the goodness of the hearts that launched them. The reasoning error known as the "fallacy of anachronism" occurs when

we reject out of hand or fail to listen to voices and hearts of people from the past because they don't share all of the same sensibilities we have today. The goodness of a person's soul is not in question because she taught Adam-God or made strange speculations about the ten tribes or lunar proselytizing, or because a sermon speaks louder about Victorian sensibilities than about things of final importance. Let policy reversals and odd personalities be part of our rich "Mormon" history.

I also really like many of the doctrines that seem to be on the "outs" lately. I love Lorenzo Snow's little couplet and the animating spirit behind our notions about eternal progression. I'm not sure just how literally to understand the godhood path, but I embrace it as a legitimate part of Mormonism and believe we will yet be able to bring it into the future. I love that our tradition teaches of

the existence of "Mother in Heaven" and I have great confidence one day we'll be able to speak in strong, robust terms about the divine feminine. I love what is uniquely or distinctly Mormon, and I don't like some of the recent efforts to downplay ways our beliefs differ from those of mainstream Christianity.

Furthermore, the term "Mormon" has, in my mind, been fully redeemed. Just as Hester Prynne took her scarlet "A" and transformed it from a badge of shame into a symbol of honor, we can wear our "M" with our heads high. I do not support the new emphasis on Jesus Christ and using the full name of the Church because I no longer want to be *Mormon*.

I support it because I hope that the shifts and public moves over the past few years may signal that we are ready to sort through and become a Church that can bless the whole planet like never before. I like the idea that these emphases might be the bow wave preceding our transformation into a genuine world religion. I don't say any of this because I am confident that "only" the gospel as we teach it holds the keys to happiness, salvation, or world peace. I am arguing this because I know the Church is *good* (or can be very good when at its best).

Some of my friends have suggested that in asking to be called "the Church of Jesus Christ," Church leaders are *really* just trying to force-feed the world our claim that we are *the* Church of Jesus Christ. I'll leave the status of that assertion without comment, but I will suggest that, regardless of motive, we take this moment as a challenge to *become* a true church of Jesus Christ. Christological debates, atonement theories, or historicity issues aside, I'm moved enough simply by Jesus' integrity and compassion. In this time of transition, that's what I will focus on. It will serve well as we face the growing pains ahead. And maybe some day, without press releases, we will be known as "the Church of Jesus Christ."

 To comment or to read comments by others, visit <[www.Sunstononline.com](http://www.Sunstononline.com)>.

#### NOTES

1. Gustav Niebuhr, "Adapting Mormonism to Emphasize Christianity," *New York Times*, 19 February 2001.
2. The full text of the press releases, letters, and suggested ways to reference the Church can be found on the Church's official website, <[www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org)> Look in the section, "News Media Resources"
3. Bob Mims, "'LDS Church' Still Term of Choice for Newspapers," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 6 March 2001.
4. Jan Shippo, "That 'M' Word," *Beliefnet.com*, 17 February 2001, <[http://www.beliefnet.com/frameset.asp?pageLoc=/story/62/story\\_6252\\_1.html&boardID=10160](http://www.beliefnet.com/frameset.asp?pageLoc=/story/62/story_6252_1.html&boardID=10160)>.

#### TEXT OF FIRST PRESIDENCY LETTER OF 23 FEBRUARY 2001

As the Church grows across boundaries, cultures and languages, the use of the revealed name, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (D&C 115:4), is increasingly important in our responsibility to proclaim the name of the Savior throughout all the world. Accordingly, we ask that when we refer to the Church we use its full name wherever possible. While this official name is not being shortened, the contractions "The Church" or "The Church of Jesus Christ" are acceptable.

We discourage referring to the Church as "The Mormon Church," "The Latter-day Saints Church" or "The LDS Church."

When referring to Church members, we suggest "members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." As a shortened reference, "Latter-day Saints" is preferred, but "Mormons" is acceptable.

We of course will continue to use the word *Mormon* in proper names like The Book of Mormon or Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and as an adjective in such references as the "Mormon pioneers."

A copy of this letter should be posted in Church buildings. Further detail on references to the Church and its members will be forthcoming in Church publications.