

The Rise of the Liberal Latter-day Saints

And the battle for the future of Mormonism



(Pete Ryan for The Washington Post)

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Photos by Katherine Frey

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CORRECTION

An earlier version of this article misstated the number of Latter-day Saints in the United States and around the world. The article has been corrected.

CORRECTION

Also, an anonymous quote about views on gay rights among Latter-day Saints was transcribed incorrectly.

In August, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the religion colloquially known as Mormonism, issued a statement to its 16.6 million adherents around the globe: “We want to do all we can to limit the spread of these viruses,” wrote Russell M. Nelson, the church’s president, along with the two most senior apostles. “[W]e urge the use of face masks in public meetings whenever social distancing is not possible. To provide personal protection from such severe

infections, we urge individuals to be vaccinated.”

To Lisa Mosman, a 59-year-old Latter-day Saint who drives a Subaru covered in anti-Trump bumper stickers around her neighborhood in Orem, Utah, the statement was a welcome surprise. “It’s actually kind of brave, because it’s going to p--- off a bunch of people that they normally don’t p--- off,” she told me.

In the weeks since, the statement has caused Latter-day Saints on the far right, long accustomed to having their beliefs reflected by church leaders, to face the kind of cognitive dissonance that liberal members have had to contend with for decades. “They’re having to ask themselves who they trust more — the prophet or Tucker Carlson,” Mosman told me, then sighed. “This is new territory for them.”

Her brother Matt Marostica, a Latter-day Saint high priest living in Berkeley, Calif., also welcomed the statement. Throughout his decades as a religious leader, his congregation

has served as a home for people who don't always feel welcome in most Latter-day institutions. (The church requested in 2018 that the terms "Mormon" and "Mormonism" no longer be used to refer to the church or its members, though many adherents continue to do so.) Marostica, a soft-spoken political scientist who works as an associate university librarian at Stanford University, honed his liberal worldview as a church missionary in Argentina during that country's "dirty war." He told me that the Berkeley Latter-day Saint congregation, called a ward, welcomes everyone — openly gay members, atheists, followers of other faiths, undocumented immigrants and even people with very conservative politics — with acceptance and love. "In Berkeley, the lunatics are running the asylum," he told me, smiling broadly. "That's a perfect way to describe our congregation."

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His ward has long served as a liberal counterweight to many conservative pronouncements made by church leaders, which in recent years have predominantly concerned homosexuality. In 2008, Berkeley, along with other liberal communities in the San Francisco Bay area, was a site of severe pushback to the church's push to pass Proposition 8, a ballot initiative that sought to limit marriage to a man and a woman. In 2015, when church policy was changed to prevent children of same-sex couples from being baptized, Marostica's community was outraged once again. (That policy was reversed four years later.) And more recently, there was a profound sense of betrayal when apostle Jeffrey Holland — long considered one of the more liberal leaders of the church — urged the faculty of Brigham Young University, the flagship campus of the university run by the church, to take up metaphorical "musket fire" against peers who show public support for gay Latter-day Saints.

In other words, liberal Latter-day Saints are accustomed to finding themselves outmatched in the church as a whole. Yet Marostica holds out hope that his community's open-tent interpretation of what it means to be a Latter-day Saint might become more common — a trend that could force the institution, thinking of its future, to play catch-up with its own members. "The Mormon Church's stance on this is damaging," Marostica said of the position on homosexuality, as we sat in the cavernous, redwood-lined chapel in Berkeley. "But it will change. It's already changing."



The Oakland Temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Berkeley, of course, is an outlier — one of the most left-wing communities in America — and it's therefore no surprise that it would play host to a progressive Latter-day Saint congregation. But when it comes to the direction of the church, it's not as much of an outlier as you might think. Long identified with conservative theology and Republican politics, the church now finds itself at something of an inflection point. More so than in other conservative religious institutions, liberals — or at least those disaffected from conservatism —

are making their presence known inside and on the perimeters of the church, provoking something of a Latter-day Saint identity crisis.

According to Jana Riess, author of the 2019 book [“The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church,”](#) fewer Latter-day Saints are following behavioral mandates like the prohibition against alcohol and coffee. Polling conducted by Riess and others has shown that the percentage of Latter-day Saints born after 1997 who do not identify as heterosexual may be 20 percent or higher. In perhaps the most dramatic break with the past, the partisan identification [gap](#) among millennial church members is narrow — 41 percent Democratic, 46 percent Republican — and a plurality of members under 40 voted for Biden.

The church as an institution is by no means on the brink of reinventing itself as a progressive force. But it is struggling with how much and whether to accommodate liberals, and the result has been substantial internal division. “I can see multiple

futures for Mormonism,” says Patrick Q. Mason, chair of Mormon history and culture at Utah State University and the author of the 2016 book “[Out of Obscurity: Mormonism Since 1945](#).” “I honestly don’t know which way it’s going to go. The one thing I know is that I think the church leadership is going to try and hold the whole thing together — that’s always been the impulse, to prevent schism. That is going to be increasingly difficult, but they’re going to try.”



A Pride festival in Rexburg, Idaho, where more than 95 percent of the population are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



Matt Marostica, a Latter-day Saint high priest living in Berkeley, Calif., cleaning his daughter's home.

Since its inception in 1830, the church has struggled with its image and relationship to the outside world. Proudly a “peculiar people” who are “in the world but not of the world,” Latter-day Saints have a theology distinctively focused on the history and symbols of the United States, whose Constitution it considers sacred; however, its relationship with the country at large has been marked from the beginning by conflict. Many historians argue that the modern church was established in 1890, when, under threat from the U.S. government, then-prophet Wilford Woodruff announced that he had received a revelation from God that polygamy could no longer be practiced by his followers. And it wasn't until 1978 that a prophetic

revelation officially declared Black men equal to White men — a move that had been previously considered doctrinally impossible.

Today, the church (which declined my request for an interview) has transformed itself from an iconoclastic band of scrappy outsiders to a highly organized, immensely wealthy and powerful institution, with 31,000 wards, 3,500 stakes (organizing chapters similar to Catholic dioceses) and 168 [temples](#) around the world. Its assets are worth more than \$100 billion. In the United States, it has 6.7 million adherents, constituting 2 percent of the country's population, and it is vastly overrepresented in the halls of influence: Latter-day Saints help lead corporations including American Express, Citigroup, Black & Decker, Dell, Deloitte, JetBlue and Marriott. And it wasn't long ago that the country's most famous member of the church, Mitt Romney, was the Republican nominee for president.

It's an institution, in short, that has excelled at survival and, often,

reinvention. Part of the reason may be a uniquely Latter-day Saint theological mechanism called personal revelation, by which individual members can receive direct divine instruction without having to go through the institution or its authority figures. It's a tool that, over the years, has enabled members to adapt the faith to their own circumstances as needed — but it may now be driving the generational-political-cultural conflict within the church.

“The Latter-day Saints display in microcosm what we see in the larger culture,” Kathleen Flake, the Richard Lyman Bushman Professor of Mormon Studies at the University of Virginia, told me. “There is political radicalization and a lack of confidence in the traditional sources of authority — and, consequently, an anxiety about where people can look for truth, about either secular or religious things.” The phenomenon is so pronounced, and so pervasive, she says, that the current moment in America might be described as “the post-truth era.” “People have lost confidence in not only the traditional authority in

society, but they've lost confidence in the fact that one can actually know what is real or true."

One can see these tensions on display in even the most conservative places in the Mormon world. Rexburg, Idaho, is among the most reliably Republican towns in America. Its population is over 95 percent Latter-day Saint, and it is home to the Idaho campus of Brigham Young University. BYU-I — semi-satirically known as "BYU I Do" because of the pressure undergraduates feel to get engaged — is widely considered more conservative, both politically and theologically, than the school's flagship campus in Provo, Utah. (One alumnus told me: "People act like 'We may not be smart enough to get into Provo, so we'll compensate by being more godly.' ")

In terms of its handling of social issues, the Idaho campus is often described as 20 to 30 years behind Utah. And yet even here, there are members who are asking big, tough questions about identity, belonging

and faith — both of their church and of themselves.

Once a week, a group of young Latter-day Saint men meet in an undisclosed location in Rexburg to process their attraction to other men. The group is affiliated with BYU-I and is “church-affirming,” meaning that its leaders cannot endorse that anyone leave the faith. The night I attended, there were 11 men sitting in a circle. Only two were White; the rest were Black, Asian or Latino. Some were public about their sexuality; others had barely begun to come out. All have a relationship with their religion that might best be described as complicated. As one member told me: “Every good thing in my family’s lives comes from the church. But the same thing that brings them a lot of good brings me a lot of turmoil.”

The evening’s topic was what the men used to hate about themselves — and how they are working on not hating themselves anymore. As each man spoke, the others listened carefully, nodding often. My eyes were drawn to a slender young Latino man with a

bold, asymmetrical swoosh of thick black bangs. When other men would mention difficult matters — “Being gay isn’t exactly accepted in my country” or “I haven’t come out to my dad yet” — he’d nod empathetically.

When it was his turn, he became visibly nervous. In a soft voice, he said his name, and then his hometown, and that he was in the beginning of his studies at BYU-I. He inhaled deeply. “And — ” he began. “I ... I like men. Like, I’m interested in men, mostly.” His face flushed. “I’m ... I’m a homosexual.” Later, he told me that, because he could not change his sexuality, he planned to stay celibate for life.



Jason Holcomb, a member of a Rexburg support group for Latter-day Saint men who are attracted to other men. The group is affiliated with the Idaho campus of Brigham Young University.

After the meeting, I was surprised that nearly all the men approached me, wanting to share their stories. The next day, I visited Jason Holcomb, a member of the group, at his airy, modern apartment in one of Rexburg's sprawling complexes. He is 24, with sparkling blue eyes, and he had decorated his space with LGBT symbols: a Pride-themed Lego set, a rainbow hat placed just-so on the living room couch. When I sat down in the living room, I noticed two artfully framed plaques, on which were

inscribed the Family Proclamation, the church's 1995 statement emphasizing that only heterosexual marriage could qualify a believer for the celestial kingdom, the highest tier of heaven — and that “disintegration” of this traditional structure would result in “calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”

Jason saw me looking at it. “I know,” he said, shaking his head. He laughed cynically. “But it’s the only thing I still have from my marriage.” I asked him if he believed in its message. He thought for a long moment, then shook his head. “No,” he said. He let loose a single, hard laugh. Then he paused. “No, I don’t.”

Jason told me about growing up in a large, devout family in Arizona: his persistent religious doubt and his understanding, even as a child, that there was something different — unacceptable — about him. Still, he served his mission, returned to BYU-I and soon married a fellow student. But the marriage was a disaster, he said, and his wife eventually found out he was gay. In June, he decided that,

upon graduating, he would move to the outskirts of Salt Lake City and live as an openly gay man. As to what role, if any, the church would have in his life, Jason did not yet have an answer. Like many other members of the support group, he planned to continue to look only to God — and not church leaders — for guidance.

That perspective is shared by Jackson Taylor, a 19-year-old from nearby Idaho Falls who was not a member of the support group but had met many of its members through social activities for young gay Latter-day Saints. Despite growing up in a devout, politically conservative family, Taylor, an effervescent, baby-faced young man with a spiky blond haircut, told me he has always known he doesn't fit into what he describes as the LDS mold — and he doesn't believe the church has the authority to tell him whether his identity will determine his ability to join his family in the celestial kingdom.



Jackson Taylor, originally of Idaho Falls, is a sophomore at the University of California at Berkeley. Taylor, who is gay, says that though his beliefs diverge from Latter-day Saint theology in major ways, he still retains a social connection with the church.

“I don’t believe in a God who will do that,” he told me emphatically, explaining that he has had spiritual experiences confirming this belief. “That may go against the church’s teachings, but I don’t believe that a group of men can tell me that I won’t have an eternal family.”

Taylor told me that though he diverges from Latter-day Saint theology in major ways, he retains a social connection with the church. However, like many gay Latter-day Saints who eventually depart to one degree or another, he left behind family members who are committed to staying — but who are also committed to using their power as

rule-abiding congregants to attempt to change the institution from within.

(As one support group member put it, “There’s a saying that there are only two types of Mormons: Mormons who support gay rights, and Mormons who have never met a gay person.”)

Because the institution is highly motivated to retain (and increase) its membership, Latter-day Saints who have competing loyalties — to gay people in their lives, and to the institution that they see as acting in opposition to those people — are not without leverage in their dealings with the church.

Taylor’s mother, Amy Manwaring Taylor, is one such person. Before her brother came out as gay — and then, years later, learning she had a gay son — she “lived in a world where I wasn’t aware of what other people are going through,” she told me. In the context of the church, she says, “I just fit right in. These are my people.” Today, however, she finds herself “on the outside” — of the church, of the restrictive political conservatism that defined the politics of her local ward, of the culture of her community. “And

now,” she says, “being outside of it — partly because of our son, and partly because now I’m able to see what it’s like from the outside — I’m grateful for it, because now I can see what changes need to be made.”

In recent years, Manwaring Taylor and her husband have devoted much of their nonprofessional lives to advocating for gay people and their loved ones within the church. They recently designed and built a house in Idaho Falls to accommodate hundreds of people — mostly Latter-day Saint parents with gay children — who meet there regularly to learn about ways to support gay members and advocate for change. In the meeting room, they display typical iconography, like portraits of Joseph Smith and ornately bound copies of the Book of Mormon, as well as a large painting done by Manwaring Taylor’s husband that features 10 trees — nine all white and one bedecked in rainbows — in front of an Idahoan mountainous backdrop. “One in 10 people are gay,” Manwaring Taylor says. “And we want to celebrate that. Life is more beautiful when it’s more colorful.”



Scenes from the Pride festival in Rexburg.

When Nancy Saxton, who is descended from the church's pioneer founders, was growing up in a rural, conservative town in Northern California in the 1960s, the church

had not yet become the powerful global institution — or, in the United States, the avatar for the Republican Party — that it is today. Saxton, a tall, boisterous woman with a loud laugh, now lives in Salt Lake City. Sitting on a wooden rocking chair overlooking her colorfully chaotic garden just a few blocks from global church headquarters, she told me that as a child, and then into her adolescence and young adulthood, she was devout, and she used her considerable charisma to spread the Gospel: On her mission, she said, her conversion numbers were consistently the highest, and she held multiple leadership positions.

After a few years living in Salt Lake City, Saxton's faith, and politics, began to liberalize. In the 1970s, she married a Presbyterian minister and went to her local ward with women active in feminist movements both within and outside the church: They were fighting not only for a more inclusive Latter-day Saint institution and theology, one that would celebrate a Heavenly Mother in addition to a Heavenly Father, but also to pass the

Equal Rights Amendment. This put them at odds with church leaders, who were encouraging members to mobilize to defeat the amendment, crystallizing the church's position as a deeply conservative institution tightly aligned with the Republican Party.

Such institutional opposition, however, did not deter Saxton or her fellow feminist Latter-day Saints. In Salt Lake City, she and her friends formed a discussion group that met in a church parking lot to talk about what she calls “the rest of the story” of Latter-day Saint history and doctrine: issues about the religion that “didn’t really make sense.” They talked about racism in the church — how scripture, and church leaders, had once taught that dark skin was a result of the “mark of Cain,” evidence of inherent sinfulness.

“I can see multiple futures for Mormonism,” says Patrick Q. Mason,

chair of Mormon history and culture at Utah State University. “I honestly don’t know which way it’s going to go.”

In the 1990s, however, church leaders cracked down on agitators, excommunicating many members of Saxton’s group and other activists across the country, including scholars known as the September Six. These actions not only caused animosity and humiliation, but also had dire consequences in the eyes of believers: Those purged from church rolls are considered ineligible to enter the celestial kingdom and thus cannot be sealed to their families for eternity.

Despite some quiet and incremental changes to women’s roles over the past two decades, some of the activists, like Saxton, simply gave up; she removed herself from church rolls in 2015. She now says she no longer

believes in Latter-day Saint theology and proudly identifies as an atheist — and a Democrat. But many others, and their daughters, have remained in the church, choosing to fight for their worldview from within.

In the past six years, many Latter-day Saint women took up another cause: fighting Donald Trump and what they see as the worrying direction of the Republican Party. In 2017, immediately after Trump's inauguration, a group of Latter-day Saint women formed a national organization called Mormon Women for Ethical Government, which now counts over 7,000 members and champions causes including immigration, anti-racism, sustainability and the environment, and voting rights.

Many in the group say that these ideas are aligned with values long championed by the church, which, for example, has always been outspoken in its support of immigration. Additionally, compared with other global faith institutions — particularly the Catholic Church — the LDS

Church is somewhat more moderate on certain controversial issues; while it prohibits elective abortions, for instance, it allows more qualifiers than some other religions.

While Mormon Women for Ethical Government is officially nonpartisan, its founding was clearly a reaction to Trump's election, and many in the group are wrestling with their political identities. "We formed as an all-female organization to give space for women to speak and not get drowned out by men's voices, as is often the case, especially in our culture," senior director Rachel Fisher Scholes, who lives in Tucson, told me. Until recently, Scholes, an energetic mother of seven who asked to be identified as a faithful member of the church, had been a staunch conservative her entire life. "I used to listen to Gordon Liddy," she says. "When he went off the air, I was like, 'Okay, I'll listen to Rush [Limbaugh], like everybody.' And I could not listen for more than two days."

About 10 years ago, Scholes began to question not only the direction of the

Republican Party, but also whether some of the party's long-standing values matched her personal ones. In Tucson, she had become familiar with the challenges faced by undocumented migrants and felt that several new pieces of immigration legislation, all introduced and backed by Republicans, were unjust, even cruel. And she realized, in time, that other issues she cared deeply about, such as environmentalism and universal health care, were not represented by the men for whom she'd voted without question all her life.

Eventually, she recalls, "I couldn't call myself a Republican anymore. And I put more thought into voting than I ever have in my life. I actually took every single candidate, every single issue, and I studied and I looked at everything they had done and voted and said. And I made a list of the ideals that were important to me. I asked: What really is important to me? What do I believe? I really had to examine all of those things."

Scholes's point of view is shared by many Latter-day Saint women whose

accumulating life experiences, coupled with their visceral aversion to Trump, have caused them to realize that, despite their religion's decades-long alliance with the Republican Party (and, in some cases, the unchanged political allegiances of their husbands), a number of social values they've long ascribed to their faith just might place them squarely in tune with, well, Democrats. And so in 2020 many of these women found themselves voting for the Democratic nominee for the first time in their lives. In fact, this phenomenon was so pronounced in Scholes's state that some political scientists, like BYU's Jacob Rugh, say that in addition to young Latter-day Saints, LDS women who voted for Democrats for the first time played a role in flipping Arizona from red to blue — and changing the course of politics both there and in the country at large.



The Oakland temple.



Art for sale at the Deseret Book shop in Rexburg.

There are Latter-day Saint communities in which a progressive theology and way of life, and a strong allegiance to the

Democratic Party, is nothing new. These tend to be in areas known for their liberal politics — places like New York and Cambridge, Mass. Most, but not all, of these places are outside the West's "Mormon Corridor" (exceptions include areas of Salt Lake City and Provo, which is home to theologically and politically liberal BYU professors). None of these places, however, is quite the same as Berkeley. And the kind of fiercely independent, nonconformist ideology the town is known for is embodied by the Latter-day Saints who have chosen to make their homes there.

When I attended Sunday services in Berkeley, I saw attire you'd be hard-pressed to find in Latter-day Saint services in the rest of the country, from flip-flops to tank tops. Multiple men in attendance wore beards, which are prohibited for missionaries and on BYU campuses, and are controversial in many other Latter-day Saint circles. And in another conspicuous flouting of norms, the newly elected leader of the elders quorum, the ward's organization of priesthood holders, wore shoulder-length hair.

Matt Marostica, who was the ward's bishop from 2008 to 2015, sees his politics as inextricable from his faith. "Mormons are like, 'We really, really value the Constitution.' Like, God had a hand in creating the Constitution! Well, if you really believe that, then you cannot support the Republican Party, because the Republican Party is actively subverting the Constitution. So, you know, like, in terms of the question of how can you be a Latter-day Saint and support the Republican Party? You cannot."

In 2017, a group of Latter-day Saint women formed Mormon Women for Ethical Government, an organization championing causes including immigration, anti-

racism, the environment and voting rights.

When Marostica assumed his role as bishop in the Berkeley ward, those convictions — as well as his duty to carry out the orders of his church superiors — were put to the test. It was a month after church leaders in Salt Lake City had instructed all California clergy to read a statement urging members to campaign to pass Proposition 8 — that is, to “do all you can to support the proposed constitutional amendment.”

At the time, Marostica used that language to his advantage. “I got guidance from the stake president to say: Here’s what the letter says: ‘Do all that you can do,’ ” he told me. He interpreted that liberally with his congregants. He told them, “If all that you can do is to not do anything, that’s fantastic — you’re doing all that you can do. If doing all that you can do means that you don’t demonize the church leadership, that is all that you can do.”

Dean Criddle, who was serving as the president in the Oakland Stake, of which Berkeley is a part, tried to influence church authorities toward more inclusive policies, hosting a panel of Latter-day Saints who felt personally wounded by the Prop 8 statement and bringing apostles to meet in private with church members who might touch their hearts, or even change their minds. Criddle told me that these actions reflect his view that change best comes from using levers within the institution — never by publicly criticizing church leaders. Often, that doesn't seem to work — the 2015 policy change regarding the children of gay parents, for instance, was the opposite of what Criddle had hoped for after he hosted an apostle at his home — but other times it may have. Criddle believes that some of the church's recent softening around gay issues came as a result of meetings he set up between members and visiting apostles.

However, what the church has not done — and, according to Criddle and other church leaders, will likely never do — is concede that it was ever wrong

in the first place. I asked Criddle if he agreed with that approach. He laughed. Then he paused. “You know,” he said, “my life experience has been that apologies can be very healing when they’re heartfelt.”

People like Jason Holcomb, the 24-year-old recent graduate of BYU-Idaho, aren’t waiting for an apology. After Elder Holland’s recent speech about “musket fire,” Holcomb told me that he had decided to identify as an inactive member. “An organization is not needed for me to have a proper relationship with God,” he told me.

Holcomb may have run out of patience — and the church may not, as Criddle says, be inclined to offer apologies. But it is also true that perhaps the one constant in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been a certain degree of turmoil — sometimes followed by profound change. The institution “rocks and rolls,” Kathleen Flake, the historian, told me. “Everyone wants to call it ‘the American religion,’ and America is always upset with it. It’s always in

tension internally and externally. Is there something different about today? As a historian, I can only say that time will tell.”

Patrick Mason, the Utah State professor, offers a bolder forecast — one that may give heart to liberal Latter-day Saints who are desperate for change within the church, as well as those who are quietly debating whether, or to what extent, they can justify staying. “People have already started to do the work to sketch out a theological rationale that would allow for the kind of revelation that allows for women’s ordination, for same-sex marriage, all kinds of things,” he says. And, he adds, with the passage of time “what was once possible then becomes probable.”

Emily Kaplan is a writer in New York.