

In Focus: Mormonism in Modern America



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Two Leaders in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Discuss the Tenets of Their Faith and its Role in Today's Political Life

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is increasingly in the spotlight, thanks in part to Mitt Romney's campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Attention has also come from television programs and big-budget movies focusing on Mormon history or fictionalized, titillating accounts of breakaway factions.

In a rare interview, Russell M. Nelson, a member of the church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, recently talked with the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life about the church's role in American society. Lance B. Wickman, the church's general counsel, joined him in the telephone interview from the denomination's headquarters. According to church doctrine, Nelson and other members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are prophets, seers and revelators. The church considers the quorum second in ecclesiastical authority to the church's First Presidency, which includes the president and two apostles.

Headquartered in Salt Lake City, the church has about 13 million members worldwide, up from 1 million 60 years ago. According to the church, the number is growing by roughly a million every three years.

The story of Mormonism begins in Palmyra, N.Y., in the 1820s with Joseph Smith, the son of a farming family there. As Smith later recounted, he received a series of visions as a teenager and young adult. As part of those visions, he said, an angel guided him to buried golden tablets. According to church history, his translations of the tablets, with the aid in part of a special device discovered alongside them, became what he called the Book of Mormon. He and his followers believed it to be a new work of Scripture. In 1831, they began what became a long migration west. A mob in Illinois shot Smith to death in 1844. Two years later, the first Mormons reached the Great Salt Lake Valley in the future Utah Territory.

Some of the recent attention in popular culture is distinctly unflattering. *The Washington Post*, in a movie review of the comedy "Georgia Rule," noted the newly released film included "an ugly strain of anti-Mormonism" in which the church is represented as "extremely repressive." Next month will bring the release of "September Dawn," a movie dramatizing the 1857 attack by a Mormon militia and Native Americans against a wagon train carrying settlers across Utah, killing at least 100 of the settlers.

But more sustained attention seems likely to come from the presidential campaign. Romney frequently talks of his faith and the ways of the church, apparently as a way of introducing both himself and a relatively new, unfamiliar faith.

Featuring Russell M. Nelson, member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Nelson, 80, is a retired cardiac surgeon, a past chairman of the Division of Thoracic Surgery at LDS Hospital in Salt Lake City and past president of the Utah State Medical Association.

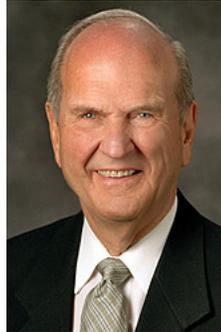
Lance B. Wickman, general counsel, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, the next most senior church administrative body, which works under the direction of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Interviewer Robert Ruby, Senior Editor, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

For additional information about attitudes toward Mormonism among the larger American public see [Public Views of Presidential Politics and Mormon Faith](#).

In simple language, what are the most important things non-church members should know about the church?

Elder Nelson: They should know that we exist to bring love and concern for the eternal welfare of all humankind, regardless of religious belief, race or nationality. We believe that we are truly brothers and sisters, so we want to project the message that we care. We love one another, and we hope to bless the lives of all mankind.



Russell M. Nelson

What should be the church's role in public life?

Nelson: Our objective is to bring happiness to people, strengthen their families and make them successful in life. You can hardly isolate that from the laboratory of their existence, which is the workplace and home.

Elder Wickman: The prophet [Joseph Smith](#) was once asked how it was that he was able to “govern his people,” as the reporter put it. Joseph responded that he taught correct principles and let them govern themselves. The church really does not see that it has an institutional role in public life as such. But the principles that it teaches and the encouragement that it gives to members to participate actively as citizens in their land – wherever that may be – naturally lead to Latter-day Saints who do become involved. And of course you're familiar with some of those who have become somewhat prominent in our own country.



Lance B. Wickman

You have to remember, too, that the church has an active presence in more than 160 nations – and members beyond that in others. So you're talking about a worldwide organization, and these principles are taught everywhere. How those people become involved in their respective communities is going to differ widely depending on where they are and the government system under which they live.

Nelson: I believe that experience has shown that human nature cannot be changed by reforming public policy. The change comes by exposing the human mind to a higher way of thinking – to teach the teachings of the God of the world as the Lord Jesus Christ. Then if you teach his principles, the people can govern themselves more appropriately, as Elder Wickman has explained.

We feel that as we maintain the integrity of our religious institutions and preserve tolerance of each other's sacred beliefs, we can preserve the strength of pluralistic society. We can promote tolerance and understanding.

The church is the focus of an increasing amount of attention, particularly in recent months. The Public Broadcasting Service recently broadcast a four-hour [documentary](#). A Hollywood [movie](#) about the Mountain Meadows massacre of 1857 is about to be released. What are the reasons for this attention, and, as church leaders, do you welcome it?

Wickman: Your guess is as good as mine as to what sparks the interest. Certainly our church is seen by many people, including those not of our faith, as being an American-originating church, and for that reason it may spark some interest.

I must say it's sometimes a little surprising. We certainly have a fascinating history, which you alluded to with your question. Maybe that is some aspect of it. It simply may be that we are in a season where you have prominent men and women on the political stage who are affiliated with our church and that that in itself just has a natural way of fitting a spotlight on the church. For those who aren't familiar with the church, the attention actually brings with it a curiosity. But those are just some personal views, and, beyond that, I don't know that it has been explored by the church institutionally.

Is this attention a good thing or does it risk creating new, unfair stereotypes?

Nelson: I feel that it's a rare opportunity because we live in a world where there is a global drift spiritually. There is an increasing breakdown of the family – the incidence of marriage is falling, the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancy is increasing, the incidence of abortion is increasing and so on. These are symptoms of a global spiritual drift. This provides a rare opportunity for the radiance of religion to light the way to a new tomorrow. We are happy to help people see that there is a better way – that there is hope, and that there is light ahead.

Wickman: I'll just add that experience teaches that the more others know about us – really know about us – the better they like us. I guess that is a good thing.

Surveys consistently find that substantial numbers of people say they would be less likely to vote for a presidential candidate if he were Mormon. In a [Pew survey](#), 30 percent of the people polled said they would be less likely to support a candidate if he were Mormon; 64 percent said it would not matter; 2 percent said that they would be more likely to support such a candidate. How do you explain this sort of reluctance? What is going on there?

Wickman: If they were talking about [Mitt Romney](#), were they Democrats?

The question was, “Regardless of the specific candidates who are running for president, we would like to know how you generally feel about some different traits. Would you be more likely or less likely to support a candidate for president who is Mormon, or wouldn't this matter to you?”

Wickman: I think that those kind of responses probably come from those who don't know us very well, because I think the more you know us and the more you know about our faith, the more comfortable you would feel with someone – assuming that the person was somebody whose political philosophy you agreed with – but certainly the less likely you would be to object to him or her based on religious affiliation.

Nelson: I think part of the confusion or the concern for people is that they know that members of the church have an allegiance to their leaders, and therefore they wonder if an elected official will be taking orders from a church official in the role of civilian government.

We can answer that concern very categorically. Our business is not political; our business is to abide by the concept of separation of church and state.

Our business is to teach a better way of life, to teach the principles and the doctrines of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is our mission. And our business is not to elect or to influence public elections; our business is not to concern ourselves with which candidates we would support one way or another; we don't. We maintain a political neutrality. We do want correct principles.

We would say to the president, to the governor, to the mayor, to the board of education people, "You do your business and we won't try to tell you how to do your business. And when it comes to matters of faith and religion, we'll do the teaching and hope you'll give us a listening ear."

Wickman: I think there is virtually no evidence to support that kind of concern on anyone's part. The church just doesn't do that and never has. It never will.

Nelson: We'll speak out on issues. If we think there is an issue at hand, we'll feel free to speak out on that. We can envision a day when we'll have a Mormon running for president on the Republican ticket and a Mormon running for president on the Democratic ticket. I mean, we won't recommend one over the other. (Laughter.)

And why do you think the church membership of one contender – Mitt Romney – seems to matter far more than that of his father, George Romney, in the late 1960s when he was a contender for the Republican presidential nomination?

Wickman: I was in and out of Vietnam in those days, and it just seemed to me that there was so much going on in connection with that war, for one thing. George Romney's candidacy seemed to me to be very short lived. It crested rather soon. It probably is not a fair comparison to make.

If there is a difference in the times, I don't know quite what to make of it, unless it has something to do with the fact that the church is certainly bigger now; it's more well-known now than it was back then.

[In the 1960 presidential campaign,]

Nelson: I would say that is an individual matter. Whatever any candidate wishes to disclose about his own religion, philosophy, commitments, whatever is really important to him, that is best coming from a candidate, male or female.

[of your remarks]

"There is no such thing in the Lord's eyes as something called same-gender marriage. Homosexual behavior is and will always remain before the Lord an abominable sin. Calling it something else by virtue of some political definition does not change reality."

A member of the [Quorum of the Twelve Apostles](#), Elder Dallin Oaks, went on to say, "The time has come in our society when I see great wisdom and purpose in a United States constitutional amendment declaring that marriage is between a man and a woman."

Can or should a church member support a political candidate who approves of civil unions or same-sex marriage?

[that discussion]

[church's]

Nelson: We can't alter what teachings have come from heaven; all we can do is support them, and we express love and appreciation for people who have challenges. Every person

on this planet has personal challenges. Some have challenges with same-sex attraction, some have problems with opposite-gender attraction that have to be controlled. We just can't live like biological specimens of some kind, responding to whatever urges; we have to discipline and control those things.

Wickman: We consider the voting franchise to be almost a sacred thing. People have a right to express themselves. If there is one fundamental doctrine in which we believe, it's the principle that the Lord has endowed every one of his children with agency, the opportunity to choose in this life. In a political sense, that means that in those societies that allow such choice to be made, that they have the opportunity and choice to exercise their voting franchise – agency – and they do that however they see fit. You have Latter-day Saints across the political spectrum in this country and in other countries.

Nelson: One of the misconceptions that ought to be speared is that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is institutionally affiliated with one party or political agenda more than another; it is not.

[the Republicans]

Wickman: Let's just take the issue of same-sex attraction, or let's just take same-gender marriage. You're aware of our position on that issue. That is certainly a view that tends to be espoused by people of a conservative point of view. That might explain why you find some number of Latter-day Saints who likewise are conservative themselves. But I think there has to be a distinction made between church principles and teachings, on the one hand, and political platforms on another.

We teach certain principles. You can find those principles in varying forms in the political platforms of both of the major political parties.

Nelson: We teach the members of our church that elected officials who are members of this church make their own decisions. It may not necessarily be in agreement even one with another or with a publicly stated church position. While the church may communicate its view to them, as it may to any other elected official, it recognizes that these officials still must make their own choices based on their best judgment and with consideration of the constituencies they were elected to represent.

So we have excellent members of the church on both sides of the aisle here in this country. And in other countries, where the government takes a different form and the flags and the constitutions are different, the teachings of the Lord are applicable regardless of constitution, party, language, race or political ideology.

The church has said it neither promotes nor opposes capital punishment. It says it “opposes elective abortion for personal or social convenience.” It does not oppose removing a medical patient from “artificial means of life support.” Different denominations deal differently with questions about life’s origins and development. Conservative denominations tend to have more trouble with Darwinian evolution. Does the church have an official position on this topic?

Nelson: We believe that God is our creator and that he has created other forms of life. It's interesting to me, drawing on my 40 years experience as a medical doctor, how similar those species are. We developed open-heart surgery, for example, experimenting on lower animals simply because the same creator made the human being. We owe a lot to those lower species. But to think that man evolved from one species to another is, to me, incomprehensible.

Why is that?

Nelson: Man has always been man. Dogs have always been dogs. Monkeys have always been monkeys. It's just the way genetics works.

[Apostles]

Nelson: We have this doctrine, recorded in the [Doctrine and Covenants, Section 101](#): "When the Lord shall come again, he shall reveal all things, things which have passed, hidden things which no man knew, things of the earth by which it was made and the purpose and the end thereof, things most precious, things that are above, things that are beneath, things that are in the earth, upon the earth, and in heaven." So as I close that quotation, I realize that there are just some things that we won't know until that day.

The church has more than 50,000 missionaries. Many of them are presumably knowledgeable about world affairs because of their missionary work. Does the church take positions on international issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict?

Nelson: Our first mission is to teach the gospel and to care for our members. We are an international church. We have more members residing outside of the United States than we do within the bounds of this country. Our members come from all sides of all political questions. We don't wade into the political debate on such controversial issues as Darfur and the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the church has committed to providing relief and development projects for humanitarian purposes in those countries and in other countries all over the world.

For example, the church provides relief to both the Israelis and the Palestinians, and in the year 2006 we responded with significant relief for the people suffering in Sudan.

Wickman: For the very reasons we talked about earlier when you were asking about political involvement, the church really tends not to get involved in political controversy, whether it's here or abroad. It does teach the principles we've talked about. It does have a very significant humanitarian effort. Elder Nelson gave some examples of that.

Another notable example from the recent past would be the tsunami relief that the church provided, across the Indian Ocean from Indonesia to India and beyond, and here in our own country, of course, with Katrina.

But the church is more interested in teaching its principles and lending a hand to people where it can than it is in weighing in on politics, and that's one of the reasons why you don't hear us saying much about those events.

One comes away with a sense of the church having this determinedly circumscribed role in public life, that while the church – through its missionaries – actively proselytizes, the church's official position is, "We'll let our religious life be our role in public life; we'll let it speak for itself."

Nelson: It's pretty simple. We care, and we would like to do unto others as we would like them to do unto us. We love one another and we show that by helping, by serving. There is a lot of interest in the humanitarian assistance that we give throughout the world, and it's very, very significant. But even more significant is why we do it. We do it because we care, and how we do it is that we teach our people to go without meals one day a month and contribute the money they would have spent on those meals to a fund that is used for the care of the poor and the needy.

It would be a misperception to view this church as wealthy, well-provisioned, with storehouses that are bulging and so on. Our welfare efforts come from people. There are people who are going without their food and contributing their money, time and talents just for the privilege of helping to serve other people.

That's the story; not the largesse of our gifts, but the hearts of the people who want to help.

[the Forum has]

A lot has been written in recent years about tensions between the evangelical community and the LDS church. Are those tensions indeed real, are there some ecumenical issues that have to be addressed, and if so, how can they be addressed?

Wickman: I think if they exist, they're one-sided. They don't exist on our end. As I said, we believe in Jesus Christ. We teach him, and him crucified; we teach his teachings and doctrines; we find a sense of brotherhood with everyone – regardless of their faith affiliation – who share such beliefs.

Nelson: I would support that view. I believe that in the humanitarian aid to which I made reference, we partner with other faith-based organizations. For example, we do a lot of work with the Catholic Relief Services. We've done significant work with the Islamic Relief Worldwide organization and a whole host of other agencies with whom we have cooperated in providing relief for others.

There are other ways that we work with other folks, like in interfaith roundtables and multidenominational services that we hold here in the headquarters in the city of Salt Lake. The church has given financial support to other faiths. Brother Wickman mentioned the tsunami in Southeast Asia. We're still giving help over there.

We're still helping Indonesia, in the Banda Aceh area particularly, with rebuilding their schools, rebuilding their mosques and bringing copies of the Koran to those people.

Wickman: We don't see it as an ecumenical thing. We don't feel any need to conform our doctrine to somebody else's. We teach the principles as we understand them and, for all the reasons that have been mentioned, try to be friends to everyone.

Let me read the [results of another poll](#). This is from February 2007. The question was, "We'd like you to think about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church. What comes to mind when you think about this religion?"

These are the top five or six responses, in descending order: Eighteen percent: "polygamy." Ten percent: "Salt Lake City, Utah." Seven percent: "good people, kind, caring, strong morals." Six percent: "dislike their beliefs, don't agree with their doctrine, false teachings."

And two more: Six percent: "door-to-door evangelizing." Six percent: "weird beliefs, strange, cult-like."

Do these findings surprise you in any way? Do they alarm you in some way?

Nelson: My goodness, those are clearly expressions of lack of information and lack of understanding. That's not surprising.

Wickman: Except for "Salt Lake City" and "have strong families and moral values," there's not one of those responses that is a very accurate description of who we are or what we believe. As I said earlier, we've learned from experience that the more others know about us, the more likely they are to like us.

They may or may not agree with all of our doctrines, but in terms of liking us and realizing us as good people who are involved in the mainstream of society and who are trying to be contributing members in our communities, I think those who know us would agree that that's pretty much who we are.

Nelson: Let me take you back to a few years ago when communism was still bearing sway in Eastern Europe. One of my responsibilities was to talk to the leaders of a country under

the yoke of communism, and I was trying to petition for permission for our people, our church and our missionaries to do their work there. They didn't want us; they didn't know us; they didn't understand us. So I said, "Now, are you embarrassed by the fact that your mortality rate from alcoholism is higher than any other country in the world? We can help you. We can teach your people a better way of life." And so we did; they allowed our missionaries to come, and they're happy we're there now. It all started with that original resistance imposed because of lack of understanding, lack of information and just kind of a rejection phenomenon just on general principles.

For many people outside the church, the present seems like a special time for the church because it is getting so much attention. Why is this happening? Why does the church seem to be the focus of so much attention? What's happening in American society?

Nelson: I think, for one reason, real-thinking people are very concerned with what's happening to society. The symptoms of immorality and social decadence are alarming, and people are honestly looking for a better way of life. They're looking for the truth. They're looking for something they can cling to.

Wickman: I think that's a good answer. I think people are looking for a better way of life. And I think that current events have had a way of catapulting the church more into the news, certainly in the person of prominent political figures in each of the major parties in this country. That's certainly been a factor.

I think the church is simply larger than it was once upon a time. I think that it's more evident in communities across the land and across the world. We're close to having 13 million members, which by comparison to some denominations isn't that large, but when viewed particularly in the United States in the sense of community, I think most people are aware that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is there. They drive by our meeting houses. They see our young people with their suits and their black name tags – our missionaries. I think these are all factors.

There are other people of prominence who have been Latter-day Saints who achieved a measure of success and acclaim, everything from the sports world to the business world. And I think all of those factors combine, and doubtless others that we haven't mentioned would help to explain the interest.

I think the Olympics here in 2002 was a curtain raiser for many who didn't know anything about Salt Lake City, much less our church or the community, until they sat through 14 or 16 days of coverage on the Olympics. Those are some thoughts that come to my mind.

Nelson: Here's another thought that comes to me, and that is that nearly everybody has a neighbor who's a member of this church. There are what, about 200 countries in the world. We have at least one member of the church in every nation of the world now.

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