



Mormon and Gay: LDS Church launches page on official website to help members, leaders

By Tad Walch @tad_walch

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SALT LAKE CITY, Utah — Four years ago, the LDS Church published its landmark website mormonsandgays.org and invited LGBT church members to "stay with us."

On Tuesday, the faith's leaders provided greater clarity and emphasis on the sensitive issues related to sexual orientation with a long-anticipated relaunch of the site, complete with important changes to its name and location, and significant new content.

The new Mormonandgay.lds.org resides on the official church website, lds.org.

"The site is part of the official website of the church and what is on it is just as official as everything else that is on that website, and that's a change," said Elder Von G. Keetch, executive director of the church's public affairs department and a General Authority Seventy.

The new web address plays a major role.

"The 'Mormon and Gay' title makes clear that someone can be both Mormon and feel same-sex attraction or identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Mormon *and* gay," said Elder L. Whitney Clayton, the senior president of the Quorums of the Seventy, in an interview with the Deseret News.

Josh Searle, a gay Mormon man in Idaho who tells his story of returning to the church in a video on the enhanced webpage, hailed the changes as "a huge step forward" for the church. He said the stories of lesbian, gay and bisexual members on the site are realistic and helpful in ways the old site was not.

"We see the faces of the leadership of the church saying, 'We really are taking the time to hear you,'" he said. "They got down in the trenches with us and showed that they are trying to understand and help."

Searle and church leaders said that with its place on the official church website, the page is a platform that can grow and improve with time. It includes three main sections. One shares stories, another is about church beliefs, and the third calls for understanding.

"This website makes clear that we want to follow the first and second commandments," Elder Clayton said. "This is about love. It's about loving God. It's about loving our neighbor as ourselves. If we can help that message get into the hearts of those who feel same-sex attraction or identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, if we can get it into the hearts of their family members, church leaders and members of congregations, the entire church will be blessed."

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The revamped website arrives nearly a year after the church clarified its doctrine on same-sex marriage in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized it nationwide. Last November, the church updated its handbook of instructions for local leaders to make clear that entering a same-sex marriage was apostasy and grounds for excommunication. The policy also prohibits baptism for the children of LGBT parents living in same-sex relationships.

The clarification was painful for many LGBT Mormons. While the website update was in the works long before the policy change, Searle said it is helpful.

Senior LDS leaders issued seven videos last week that called on church members to embrace diversity and asked them to be more inclusive. One member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder D. Todd Christofferson, said leaders want to cultivate a church culture in which "people can bring different gifts and perspectives, and the wide range of experience and backgrounds and challenges that people face will show us what really is essential in the gospel of Christ."

The unscripted videos from five senior members of the Twelve and two senior women leaders are meant to speak to anyone in the church who feels marginalized.

Mormonandgay.lds.org makes it clear that Mormons can experience same-sex attraction or identify as gay, lesbian and bisexual and still be active, temple-recommend-holding church members if they comply with the law of chastity, which requires that all sexual activity take place in heterosexual marriages.

"We don't believe all the answers are in this site," Elder Keetch said. "We believe it is the next step forward. We and others, including those who have same-sex attraction and their families and others are learning more and more about this. The name of the site, 'God Loveth His Children,' comes from 1 Nephi, where right after saying, 'God loveth his children,' we read the words, 'I do not know the meaning of all things.' I think this is the perfect title and theme for this site. We know that God loveth his children, we know that there is a way to return back to him, but we don't know everything, and we are continuously learning in this area."

The site reiterates the church's teaching that attraction is not identity. Instead, the church teaches that a person's primary identity is as a child of God, and that learning self-mastery is important to becoming like Heavenly Parents.

The site includes a major increase in content.

"There are more stories," Elder Clayton said. "There are stories as much about the persons impacted by the feelings and inclinations directly as there are about family members, siblings, parents and church members. We're going to give an example of what people can do as a parent, as a sibling, as a loved one, as a church leader or ward member to support and love and encourage people who deal with same-sex attraction to keep the commandments and find the peace the gospel brings."

Searle's is one of those stories. A 33-year-old small-business owner in Idaho who grew up in a large, Idaho farming family, Searle served an LDS mission, then came out as gay. He entered gay relationships and faced church discipline for his choices.

He eventually chose to return to the church.



"Trying to live a single, celibate life as a gay member in the Mormon Church is difficult," he said on the new website. "So this begs the question, now what? Am I doomed to live a life of misery and loneliness as I try to live a celibate life? Is my choice to remain single and try to be celibate emotionally or mentally healthy, or even possible?"

He provides three responses to his own questions. First, his intimate experiences with God made it clear to him that he remain in the church. Second, he knows that he foregoes certain benefits by choosing not to enter into a gay relationship, but he finds other aspects of joy and peace by trying live what he understands as God's will that he didn't feel while in gay relationships. Third, he has a fulfilling daily life when his activities are founded on prayer, following spiritual promptings and learning and applying gospel principles.

The site includes tips for seeking professional help and tips for families and friends, including numerous videos from family and friends of the gay, lesbian and bisexual Mormons whose stories are told on the site.

The website makes it clear that heterosexual marriage is not an appropriate therapeutic response to same-sex attraction.

The site includes an article on depression and suicide with a link to the new church webpage preventingsuicide.lds.org.

The site says that the church is providing training to local leaders for helping LGBT members.

"We hope that the website will be a means of providing an example to local church leaders," Elder Clayton said, "that they'll see what other church leaders have learned, that they'll apply that learning in their own ministries, and as they reach out one on one to people who are facing this particular situation in their lives, they'll be blessed and helped and enhanced in their service and in their ministry."

"What this site is intended to help local leaders understand," Elder Keetch added, "is that when (local leaders) have these situations, they should first respond with love and hope. If they'll respond with love and hope in helping that individual figure out which path to walk down while still teaching the truths and doctrines of the church, that is the very best way they can provide help."

Elder Keetch said the process of updating the site began nearly two years ago when church staff began to talk to people who deal with same-sex attraction on a daily basis. That included LGBT members, their families, their support groups, those that provide professional help and counseling, and LGBT advocacy groups.

"We talked to all of them," he said. "We then took what the church had learned and we brought it to prophets and seers, to the Twelve and the First Presidency, who were extremely engaged and immersed in this. They know everything that is on the site, and they've reviewed everything that is on the site. All of those inputs were important. All of them played a very large role. Of course for us, the biggest role was played by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve in making clear that this is where the church stands on these issues."

Email: twalch@deseretnews.com



Faith



New Mormon and Gay website features series of videos from LDS Church members

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