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Why Mormons Leave: An Oral History Project

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According to the Pew Research Center, Americans are leaving the religion of their childhood more than ever before.¹ The rise of the “nones”² appears greatest among the Millennial Generation,³ but people from all age groups are leaving religion. One of the religions that is affected by this phenomenon is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also known as the Mormons. While any faith transition is a difficult experience for someone of any religion, a faith transition can cause great emotional pain for Mormons, fracturing family relationships and isolating them from friends and neighbors. The question arises as to why members of the Mormon Church would choose to leave if it is so painful. While the reasons vary, the purpose of this oral history project is to explain why people leave from the point of view of the person who transitioned out of Mormonism compared to the faithful Mormon’s point of view.

In two informal studies, one conducted by the author, the other by John Dehlin,⁴ believing Mormons claim that people who leave do so because they are offended, desire to sin, never had a testimony or are lazy, or a combination of these reasons.⁵ The oral history project performed in conjunction with this paper found that people move away from the church⁶ for a variety of reasons far beyond the scope of what believing Mormons think. These reasons fall

¹ Benjamin Wormald, ““Nones” on the Rise: New Report Finds One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, October 08, 2012, accessed October 25, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise-new-report-finds-one-in-five-adults-have-no-religious-affiliation/>.

² The “nones” refer to people who do not identify with any organized religion.

³ The Millennial Generation generally refers to people who were born between 1982-2004.

⁴ John Dehlin, “Understanding Mormon Disbelief Survey – March 2012 Results and Analysis,” Why Mormons Question, March 2012, accessed October 21, 2017, <http://www.whymormonsquestion.org/2012/05/21/understanding-mormon-disbelief-march-2012-results-and-analysis/>.

⁵ Informal study conducted at Utah Valley University by the author, September-November 2017

⁶ The use of the word “church” in this essay refers to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

under two main themes. The first theme includes historical and doctrinal reasons and the second theme is disagreement with the church about social issues or cultural issues. For many post-Mormons,⁷ their transition was not caused by one thing, but by a combination of themes.

Literature Review

While the study of Mormonism is not a new area of research, disaffection from the church is a recent focus. Stan Albrecht and Howard Bahr wrote an essay entitled “Patterns of Religious Disaffiliation: A Study of Lifelong Mormons, Mormon Converts, and Former Mormons.” Albrecht and Bahr claimed that although there was research on Mormons leaving to join another religion, there is not a lot of research on why Mormons “disaffiliated by dropping out.”⁸ Much of the work that these researchers have done on religious dropouts was on college students who left their faith during their studies at a university.⁹ This oral history project addresses “dropouts” from across the age spectrum.

In addition to Albrecht and Bahr’s research on why people leave the church, John Dehlin presented research on the subject of why Mormons leave the faith at the 2012 Mormon Studies Conference at Utah Valley University.¹⁰ He wrote that many faithful Mormons believe that people leave because they were offended, were lazy, never had a testimony, or had a desire to sin. In addition to those reasons, he found that believing Mormons think people leave the church because they read anti-Mormon materials. Dehlin maintains that according to his study this is not accurate.¹¹ Even though Dehlin provides some feedback from respondents to his online survey,

⁷ Post-Mormons are people who were once members of the Mormon church but have disaffiliated from the church.

⁸ Stan L. Albrecht and Howard M. Bahr, "Patterns of Religious Disaffiliation: A Study of Lifelong Mormons, Mormon Converts, and Former Mormons," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 22, no. 4 (1983), accessed October 5, 2017, doi:10.2307/1385774.

⁹ IBID

¹⁰ John Dehlin, "2012 UVU Mormon Studies Conference - John Dehlin on Why Mormons Question," YouTube, May 02, 2012, accessed October 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gVUuWd2gP0>.

¹¹ IBID

he was not able to interview and talk to them all. This essay, and the oral histories that accompany it, develops and contributes to the growing amount of writing about former Mormon's disaffection from the church.

In a news story from KUTV News, located in Salt Lake City, the newscasters reported that in the church, "the loss of young members is evident."¹² In another news story from the same station, the newscasters reported, "research shows Mormon millennials are becoming more republican than their parents, but leaving the faith in larger numbers than previous generations."¹³ These news stories corroborate with other sources that show people are leaving their religion of origin. However, these stories only scratch the surface as to the reasons people are leaving.

Clearly, there is a great need for a closer examination of the reasons people leave Mormonism from the post-Mormon's point of view. This study fulfills this need using oral history interviews to discover why people transition out of Mormonism in their own words, and in a candid and open interview. This project picks up where John Dehlin's project left off, adding to the growing evidence that "dropouts" from the Mormon religion leave for a variety of reasons.

Method

This oral history project consists of fifty-four oral history interviews conducted by the author over a period of four months in 2017. The participants made up an approximately equal mix of twenty-six males and twenty-eight females and ranged between the ages of 18-65. The interviews took place at Utah Valley University or in the home of the participant. The format of

¹² <http://kutv.com/news/local/losing-their-religion-millennials-including-utahns-leaving-church>.

¹³ <http://kutv.com/news/local/millennial-mormons-leaving-faith-more-than-previous-generations-are-more-republican>.

the interview was conversational. The author asked a series of questions and the participant answered them. These recorded interviews lasted from approximately one hour to close to four hours. Questions ranged from the level of orthodoxy in the home of origin, to how the church affected their ideas about gender roles, to whether or not their transition changed their political ideology. The whole list of eighty questions is found in the addendum. The author found participants by posting on social media in groups where the majority of people were former members of the church. In addition to using social media to find participants, the author used snowballing¹⁴ and personal acquaintances.

With over 70 hours of recorded interviews using eighty questions, the scope of this project is vast. In order to maintain focus in this short paper, the author is using only one of the eighty questions. This question is, “What was the thing that really started the ball rolling for you?” This question was in reference to the start of the participant’s transition. The goal of this question was to see what caused the beginning of their faith transition. In some cases, the participant’s answer not only included the start of the transition, but also evolved into discussion of further reasons for leaving the church.

Why Do Believers Think People Leave?

Historian Marlin Jensen said, “the church has not seen this level of apostasy since Kirtland, a period where about one third of the church membership left.”¹⁵ For believing members of the church and for those that are leaving, the reasons matter. For the church, the reasons matter because [in order to retain as many members as possible] they need to know how to stop the hemorrhage.

¹⁴ This is a type of nonprobability sampling technique in which existing study participants refer future subjects from among their acquaintances.

¹⁵ Peter Henderson and Kristina Cooke, "Special Report: Mormonism besieged by the modern age," Reuters, January 31, 2012, accessed October 24, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mormonchurch/special-report-mormonism-besieged-by-the-modern-age-idUSTRE80T1CM20120131>.

It would be beneficial for the church to recognize that there is not one reason for disaffiliation from Mormonism. They need to address issues that participants gave in the interviews to prevent other members from leaving the church as well. For people that leave the faith, their reasons matter because they do not want to be thought of as petty, lazy or sinful. These people want others to know they left the church because their morals no longer allowed them to stay. According to an informal poll conducted by the author,¹⁶ a study by John Dehlin,¹⁷ and statements from a church leader, people leave for reasons that fit into these categories:

1. People want to sin or have sinned and feel too guilty to come back. This category includes people that want to drink, smoke, have sex outside of marriage, shop or play on Sundays, swear, watch pornography, or a variety of other activities that the church views as sinning.
2. People who leave never had a “real” testimony. This category includes people who were baptized for the wrong reasons or did not “strive” to develop a testimony during their life.
3. People who leave the church are lazy. This reason labels people who leave as indolent and slothful. They leave the church because it is easier not to be a member.
4. People leave the church because they are offended. According to David Bednar, a leader in the church, this is the biggest reason that people leave the church.¹⁸

Most of these reasons are easy to understand, however, the last reason, people leaving because they are offended, needs clarification. In a speech given at a twice-yearly general conference of the church, Bednar claimed to have visited hundreds of people who were no longer active in the church to ask them why they stopped attending. He said that there was a common

¹⁶ Informal study conducted at Utah Valley University by the author, September-November 2017

¹⁷ John Dehlin, "2012 UVU Mormon Studies Conference - John Dehlin on Why Mormons Question," YouTube, May 02, 2012, accessed October 21, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gVUuWd2gP0>.

¹⁸ David A. Bednar, "And Nothing Shall Offend Them," LDS.org, October 2006, , accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2006/10/and-nothing-shall-offend-them?lang=eng>.

theme among these people. It is that they stopped attending or believing because they were offended. He defined being offended as feeling insulted, mistreated, ignored, or disrespected. Bednar also claimed that people who were offended and left the church chose to be offended. They also had some other deep-seated problem, in addition to being offended, that caused them to leave.¹⁹

Not all believing Mormons think that taking offense is a completely unjustified reason for leaving the church. Julie de Azevedo Hanks stated in an article in *Meridian Magazine*, a periodical for believing Mormons, that “the ‘choosing to be offended’ card is used to judge, invalidate someone else’s experience, to shame or chastise him/her, and perhaps even to effectively end discussion. It can also be used as a shield to avoid self-reflecting on whether or not we’ve acted offensively and need to make amends. It can be used as a weapon of judgment or minimizing another person’s experience.”²⁰ While Hanks does not come out and say that offense is not a reason to leave the church, she indicates that Mormons often use this “card” to judge a person that leaves because they were shamed, hurt, or judged.²¹

From the Mouth of the Unbeliever

In their own words, this project shows that Mormons leave for a variety of reasons. None of the reasons corresponds with the reasons believing Mormons give for one’s disassociation from the church. While some people’s reason for transitioning falls outside of the two main themes listed in this paper, most of them are categorized under one of them. In addition, the majority of

¹⁹ David A. Bednar, "And Nothing Shall Offend Them," David A. Bednar, October 2006, accessed October 21, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2006/10/and-nothing-shall-offend-them?lang=eng>.

²⁰ Julie, de Azevedo Hanks, "You’re Choosing to be Offended," LDS Magazine, March 14, 2016, , accessed October 21, 2017, <https://ldsmag.com/youre-choosing-to-be-offended/>.

²¹ IBID

people transition for more than one reason. The author, in these types of cases, chose to cut the interview into parts and present the reasons in both of the sections.

The first theme that this paper addressed is that of historical and doctrinal issues. These include problems with the historicity of the Book of Mormon, polygamy, polyandry, Blacks and the priesthood and the Book of Abraham, among others. Doctrinal issues include questions on canonized scripture, Mormonism being the one and only true church on the Earth, the Proclamation on the Family, and disagreement on the church's stand on sexuality.

Ironically, many former Mormons started their journey out of the church because they read or attended church sponsored materials or events. Allen,²² a lifelong member of the church, was a young man who loved going to Education Week²³ to learn about the church, its history and doctrine. One year at Education Week,²⁴ Allen attended a class on the Book of Abraham, a part of the Mormon scriptural canon. Allen said that he had been taught his whole life that the Book of Abraham was translated by Joseph Smith, using the power of God, from papyri the church purchased in the early days of the church. Allen said that the church taught that the book was a literal translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics. "I was really excited when they put the papyri on the big screen in the class and started to talk about it. Then the speaker said that it doesn't actually translate into what we have as the Book of Abraham." After he said that, the speaker moved on without explaining anything further. Allen was thinking, "Wait a minute! Time-out! What did I just hear? It stuck in my head that the things I had been taught about the Book of Abraham my whole life was not what he taught that day." It stuck with him and eventually, a few years later, he looked into the subject again. That was when he read the essay about the Book of

²² The author only used first names in this paper in order to allow for some anonymity for the participants.

²³ Education week is a yearly conference geared to believing Mormons. It takes place in Provo, UT at the church owned Brigham Young University.

²⁴ Allen does not remember the year and there is not sufficient external data to ascertain the date.

Abraham on LDS.org and did his own research on the internet. That was the beginning of the end for him. He realized that the whole church was entirely—in his own words—“bullshit.”²⁵

Anna, a strong believing member of the church, always had a problem with polygamy. She said she put it on her “shelf”²⁶ and tried to ignore it. However, when her husband, who was serving as the Elder’s Quorum President,²⁷ started to question the truthfulness of the church because of historical inaccuracies, it started to bother her again. She was worried about her husband, that he would leave the church, so he confided in her Visiting Teacher.²⁸ She told her Visiting Teacher that she thought her husband might be losing his faith. Anna believed that her conversation with her Visiting Teacher would be held in confidence. That is not what happened. Her husband got a call from the bishop²⁹ of their ward to discuss what Anna told her Visiting Teacher. Anna was devastated. She thought that the things she told her Visiting Teacher were confidential. Anna had asked the Visiting Teacher to keep the information to herself, but the Visit Teacher told the Relief Society³⁰ President who then told the Bishop. Anna said that she has since realized that nothing in the church is confidential.

Anna realized that the problems her husband had with the church were creating a separation between them. She knew she loved him and wanted to understand him. She told him that she wanted to hear the things that were bothering him about the church. She would only be

²⁵ Allen, "Mormon Transitions Project," interview by author, June 3, 2017.

²⁶ Throughout this paper and in the interviews, participants talk about their shelf. This is a mental shelf, where, while the participants were believers they would place things that they didn’t understand, didn’t agree with or were causing cognitive dissonance. Sometimes the participants say that their shelf broke, referring to the things they tried to ignore, but no longer could do so.

²⁷ This position is a leadership role within the men’s organization of the church.

²⁸ A Visiting Teacher is a women assigned by the local leadership in her local ward (a geographic area assigned to meet together) to uplift, fellowship and care for her.

²⁹ A bishop in the LDS church is the leader of a geographic “ward.” He is similar to a pastor or worship leader in other religions. His job is to guide the people of the ward in righteousness, serve as a judge in Israel, and protect the good name of the church.

³⁰ Relief Society is a women’s organization in the Mormon Church. It has a presidency of women to oversee the day-to-day operations, but the male leadership in the wards oversees the organization.

able to take small doses, and she would have to stop and process the information when she had had enough, but she did not want to have something between them. She listened to her husband and did her own research and realized that she no longer believed the church was true. She read *Mormon Enigma* and *The 19th Wife*, both of which were histories about polygamy within Mormonism. She listened to *A Year of Polygamy*, a podcast by Lindsey Hansen Park, about her study of polygamy within Mormonism. She knew that the loving God that she believed in would never subject women to the cruelty that the church subjected them to via the “commandment” of polygamy. From her study, Anna decided that polygamy was not from God, but that a man, Joseph Smith, came up with the idea so that he could excuse his unfaithful behavior to Emma and the members of the church.³¹

Another former Mormon, April, discussed the impetus for her faith transition out of Mormonism. “The summer after I started to come out as a lesbian to some of my friends, I started doing research on the church.” She was not getting enough straightforward information from the church, so she broadened her search to sources that were not “church approved.” When she did this, she found the CES letter,³² the essays on LDS.org³³ and a history of the church’s dealings with the LGBT community including Proposition 8 in California. She called the things she discovered, “the horrible truth.” She said that many sources within church approved material did not have adequate support from “scientific evidence.” She found that the CES letter included great primary sources from hard evidence.

³¹ Anna, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, July 26, 2017.

³² CES Letter is one Latter-day Saint’s honest quest to get official answers from the LDS Church on its troubling origins, history, and practices. Jeremy Runnells was offered an opportunity to discuss his own doubts with a director of the Church Educational System (CES) and was assured that his doubts could be resolved. After reading Jeremy’s letter, the director promised him a response. No response ever came. (From the CES Letter website)

³³ The Mormon Church wrote a series of essays about subjects that people often find controversial. These include essays on race and the priesthood, Joseph Smith and polygamy, differing accounts of the first vision, and others.

April found that the church was no longer true to her. She was angry and had feelings of being lied to, “even though the church has to know they are lying just to get money.” She said that she was, “part of a massive business scheme, and I fell for it!” More than anger, “I felt the need to get as far away from the church as possible, as soon as possible.”³⁴

When Cami was assigned to teach a lesson to the Young Women³⁵ in her ward about Joseph Smith, she wanted to dig deeper to help the girls to connect with him. Cami said she did not know that there were controversial issues about Joseph Smith, so she used the internet to do research about him. She was surprised to find negative things online about him. When she was reading information that she thought was anti Joseph Smith she felt terrible. Cami thought the bad feelings were caused by Satan, “because I used to run life by feelings,” so she needed to get away from it. Over time, she could not get the things that she found online out of her head, and wanted to know more. She wanted to know if the information was true or not. “I got past feeling bad about looking at the material and realized that I wanted to know what the truth was if I was going to devote my whole life to it.”

When she started to study information from the internet, Cami said the information was, “earth shattering,” and caused her to feel “complete and utter despair, depressed, and sad.” Cami was an all-in or all-out type of a person, so she told her husband she no longer believed and was not going back to church. Cami said that many active Mormons do not know their own history because the church warns members away from investigating anything outside of church provided sources. This means that the church controls the narrative. If the church can control what people hear, what they read and what they watch they can control their thinking and thus control them.³⁶

³⁴ April, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, June 19, 2017.

³⁵ The Young Women’s Organization is an auxiliary group for girls aged 12-18 in the Mormon Church.

³⁶ Cami, “Mormon Transition Project,” Interviewed by the author May 10, 2017.

When Dan was a young man, he served a mission for the church. As he was being trained as a missionary, he and his companion³⁷ walked by a Masonic Lodge on a regular basis. Dan made friends with the janitor of the lodge because he knew that Joseph Smith was a mason and he wanted to know more about it. He asked if they could tour the building and the janitor said no, “this is a special lodge where famous people had been members in the past including presidents of the United States.” However, after Dan continued to talk with him, the janitor finally agreed to take them on a tour. Dan and his companion went on the tour and saw all the Masonic symbols and signs in the lodge. He said, “It was like walking into an LDS temple, only more gothic.” The janitor showed them around and gave him access to the books and the signs. Dan realized that everything was the same as the Mormon temples. He thought, “HOLY COW! Joseph Smith stole the temple ceremony from the Masons. He was not inspired.” After the tour, Dan decided to research Masonry at the library. He found out that Masonry started in the 1500’s, it was a power brokers men’s club. Joseph Smith was on the highest level of Masonry.

The second thing that caused Dan to begin his transition out of Mormonism was his Great-great grandfather’s journals. His grandma sent these journals to him while he was at Brigham Young University (BYU). Dan’s Great-great grandfather was a close friend of Joseph Smith. Dan was trying to understand the Kirtland bank issues and other problems that occurred in Kirtland. The things Dan was studying about Joseph Smith in his religion classes at Brigham Young University did not match up with the Joseph Smith that was described in the Great-great grandfather’s journals. Religion teachers would tell him one thing privately, because they knew Dan had access to these journals and he could not be fooled by the rhetoric that they fed to the average student. In the religion class, they depicted a different version of Joseph. This dishonesty

³⁷ Missionaries for the Mormon Church work with another missionary. They are called companions.

on the part of the professors at a church owned school put doubts into Dan's head that later blossomed into his decision to leave the church.³⁸

Another participant named Dan said that his transition started when he started a new job. One of his coworkers, who was a former Mormon, told Dan his transition story. He shared it in a non-confrontational way and told Dan how he could find information on his own. His coworker allowed Dan to arrive at his own conclusions without appearing bitter or angry at the church. Dan said that his issues were primarily in regards to church history. He was a little concerned about the timing of his investigations because he and his wife were in the middle of their second adoption through the church's social services program. If he were to leave the church during the adoption, he believed that the church might stop the adoption from finalizing. He did not want to jeopardize the adoption, but he remembered that J. Reuben Clark, a past church leader, once said, "If we have truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not truth, it ought to be harmed."³⁹ He decided to do the research because he was not worried that anything that he found would change his mind. In Dan's own words, he went from, "I am okay with Mormonism to I just found something that is really concerning to me about Mormonism to continuing to add things to my shelf." Dan said that people claimed he took the easy path by leaving the church. He said, "The only reason I chose to do what I did was because I have integrity and I acted upon my beliefs. It would have been much easier to just forget about what I learned and go with the flow, not ruffling anyone's feathers or upsetting anyone."⁴⁰

Daniel was a young man barely old enough to participate in the project. One of the historical things that deeply affected him was when he learned about Joseph Smith's

³⁸ Dan, Interviewed by the author, May 19, 2017.

³⁹ J. Reuben Clark, *The charted course of the Church in education* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992).

⁴⁰ Dan, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, June 16, 2017.

participation in not only polygamy with adult women, but also marrying young girls. That was disgusting to him. He was also very upset when he learned that Smith also practiced polyandry.⁴¹ Daniel said that he thought it was terrible that Smith sent these men on missions for the church and then while they were gone, married their wives.⁴²

Donny and his wife (she wanted to remain anonymous) also had more than one reason for leaving the church. One of the reasons was similar to Daniel's reasons. Polygamy and polyandry "pissed me off!" Donny said with anger in his voice. The essays on the church's website made him realize that all the things that he heard about during his life, things his leaders told him were anti-Mormon, were true. The church was lying. Donny, who served his mission in Missouri and thought he knew church history very well, had no idea about any of the information contained in the church essays. After reading "Race and the Priesthood" on LDS.org, Donny said, "that was the end for me!"

Donny's wife was trying to make all the information in the essays correlate with what she had learned in her life, but she could not. She said, "The prophet Joseph Smith was not even following his own doctrine!" She was referring to how Smith did not ask his first wife and gain her approval before taking a second wife, as was stated in Section 132 of the church canonized scriptures, the Doctrine and Covenants.⁴³

Jenn told the author in her interview that, "the church never made sense to me logically." The things she did not understand, like why God did not help the starving people in Africa, but would help people in Utah find their keys, she put on her shelf and hoped someday she would understand it.

⁴¹ Polyandry is when a woman is married to more than one man.

⁴² Daniel, "Mormon Transition Project," Interviewed by the author, August 14, 2017.

⁴³ Donny and his wife, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 6, 2017.

I heard about the seer stone that the church published pictures of and said that this was the stone that Joseph Smith used to translate the Book of Mormon. This truly upset me because I remember specifically being taught in a Sunday school lesson that this story of the seer stone and the rock in the hat was an anti-Mormon lie and the enemies of the church made this story up to hurt the church. That lesson was the one critical thing that caused me to never investigate the church. I was afraid I would find anti-Mormon lies. It was not until much later that I learned not to fear information. That was the point in which I stated investigating the church.⁴⁴

Jace stated to make a list of things that he believed the church was “getting wrong” at the age of 15. At the time, he believed that there must be a reason, so it did not shake his faith. When he was about 20 years old, he found that, “there were so many things the church was getting wrong and I started to doubt.” The first thing that he thought was definitely wrong was when one of his leaders in a Priesthood⁴⁵ meeting said, “You should never read or approach anything that is ‘anti-Mormon’ because you could be tricked into believing it.” Jace thought, “You know, that does not make any sense. Not reading or listening to things is the definition of ignorance. If I could talk to anti-Mormon people, I would love it! It would be really interesting. I could learn more about why I believe the things that I believe and would be curious to hear what their arguments were.”

In Jace’s late teens during a Fast and Testimony Meeting,⁴⁶ he heard people say things that did not make sense. They would justify God answering a prayer or a belief in God without any real evidence. He could see “a pattern that something was not right, that people were kidding themselves, that there was a little bit of delusion going on. I assumed that other people noticed the incongruities, but I thought that they were just rationalizing things like I was. I think I realized that a lot of people didn’t notice at all, they just had no idea.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Jenn “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, May 23, 2017.

⁴⁵ Mormons believe that the priesthood that only worthy males hold is the power of God.

⁴⁶ Each month, a Mormon congregation has a meeting, usually on the first Sunday of the month, in which members stand and bear testimony of the truthfulness of the church. In addition, the members over eight years old fast for two meals and donate the money they would have spent on food to the ward to help the needy.

⁴⁷ Jace, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 14, 2017.

In an interview with Karmyn, she shared how painful polygamy has always been to her as a woman. In her own words, Karmyn told about how she started her transition and how happy it made her.

My faith transition began with internet information. Before that, there were many things that happened to me in my career and exposure to the church. I had a lot of things on my shelf that were bothering me. I was glancing through Facebook and there was a man that I went to high school with that said he liked a story about polygamy. Since polygamy was a big one on my shelf, I just glanced at it. I clicked on it and opened the story and it was actually a couple who were facing discipline from the LDS church because, after doing a lot of research, they claimed that polygamy was not of God, that it was basically Joseph Smith's idea. So when I was reading down through it and I considered their side of the story and it just kind of clicked with me it made me want to find out more. That was the beginning for me.

When I thought about it and used my own reason and my own critical thinking, I realized that polygamy was not of God, but that Joseph Smith made it up. I started to wonder what else was not true. If the church is still teaching today that it was of God, what else am I missing. So that led to an obsessive, frantic three or four weeks of studying church history. I really wanted to have an objective view of both sides, because some people, when they find out that the church might not be true they are very angry and sad and they feel like they might have had something torn from them. That their life is at an end because they don't know who they are. What concerned me was how happy I was, how excited I was, how thrilled I felt, I wanted to cry with happy tears that I was not going to end up an eternal polygamist wife in heaven. That got me thinking that the church was not true, that Joseph Smith was not a prophet, and all the other stuff the church teaches is not true and I am so extremely happy about this, I better look at both sides because this could just be a fluke or it could be something that someone just came up with. I wanted to find evidence to prove the argument. So I looked at things that were approved by the church. I looked at the church website; I looked at the essays that the church wrote about touchy subjects like polygamy. I also looked through Mormon Stories and Mormon Think and podcasts and stuff that is so popular. I took a good year to 18 months to ponder about the things that I read and heard. Because with every new aspect that you learn, you have to then reconsider everything that you have been taught in the past and come up with a judgement about what you think is the truth.⁴⁸

Pat found inconsistencies in church history while on a cross-country drive. She was moving to Utah to prepare to serve a church history mission for the church. One of her friends told her about podcasts and encouraged her to listen to some of her favorites while she drove.

⁴⁸ Karmyn, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 23, 2017.

She told Pat how much she liked Dan Witherspoon and *Mormon Matters*, but she warned her not to listen to *Mormon Stories*. Pat listened to a year-and-a-half worth of *Mormon Matters* at a faster than normal speed. The last thing she listened to in that podcast was an interview that Witherspoon conducted with John Dehlin. After the interview she thought, “I don’t agree with Dan, I agree with John!” She then listened to a couple of years’ worth of *Mormon Stories* podcasts. She learned about Lindsey Hansen Park’s podcast, *A Year of Polygamy*. She listened to a podcast about Northstar, a treatment program for homosexuals. She said, “The church was sending people to this program and trying to fix their homosexuality. They [the church] just doesn’t know what they are doing!”

While passing through Kirtland and Nauvoo, Illinois, she stopped and took some tours. One of the tours was in the room where Joseph Smith received the revelation about the Word of Wisdom. “I asked the woman (that was conducting the tour) if it was not in the script to talk about Emma at all. The woman said, ‘Well, I like to think that...’ and I thought, you don’t have to think anything. It’s CHURCH HISTORY! This tour guide had no idea about the history of the church that was in the essays or other sources on LDS.org!”

Pat said that she continued to listen to podcasts but at the time, she had no idea what she was getting into. She had heard that women sealed themselves to Joseph Smith after he died, but she did not realize that he was married to numerous women, some as young as fourteen, some with living husbands, while he was living. Smith’s first wife, Emma had no idea that this was happening. Pat tells about the moment her shelf broke and everything came crashing down.

I arrived in Utah and I was coming through Emigration Canyon and I heard Lindsey [Hansen Park in a podcast from *A Year of Polygamy*] say, ‘this is not my Zion, and I am picking up my handcart and going someplace else.’ I knew that what she said applied to me. Here I was, moving to Utah, or all places, and I was going to leave the church! I knew that I wanted nothing to do with the (Mormon) church again.

Pat never did report to the Missionary Training Center.⁴⁹

Tracee and Rob, a married couple, ended up leaving the church together, although their path out of the church was not always the same. The beginning of the journey for Ryan occurred while he was serving a two-year mission for the church. A group of Jehovah's Witnesses knocked on his door and he and his companion spoke with them. The subject of Blacks and the priesthood came up and some of the things the visitors said concerned Rob. In that area, Rob and his companion knocked on doors ten hours a day, looking for someone to teach about the church, but found no one. They had a lot of extra time on their hands, so Rob did research about the subject of Blacks and the priesthood. "I found out about the 'doctrine' about the curse of Cain and I hated it. I linked it all back through the scriptures." Rob said that he went through all the canonized books of scripture within Mormonism and found scriptural references that the church used to support their stance. "I found the trail, and I thought I don't know why God would do this but I found the curse of Cain and where God lifted the Curse of Cain. It was an inequality thing, and I hate that, but I thought I had found the actual scriptural trail that showed that it was a revelation from God. That was a huge crack for me, but I solved it through the scriptures." In his list of issues Rob had with the Mormon faith, he listed blood atonement (the idea that to pay for some sins one had to actually shed blood) and the Adam/God theory. He said this (the Adam/God theory) "was a huge nail in the coffin because as Mormons, our whole basis for our church is that the prophet communicates with Jesus Christ. How can you communicate with Jesus Christ and be confused about who god is?" For Rob that was "really simple." He stated with a grim look of determination on his face, "If he doesn't know who God is, he is not talking to Jesus Christ and he is not a prophet. He is not receiving revelation. He is just doing whatever

⁴⁹ Pat, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 3, 2017.

the hell he wants to make himself happy.” Rob said that he was always taught that God would remove a prophet if he is teaching false doctrine and leading the people astray, “but Brigham Young did it for three decades.” Rob gave a big sigh.⁵⁰

The beginning for Tracee had to do with historical issues including polygamy. Tracee met for lunch with a friend that was going through a painful divorce. While they talked during their lunch, her friend asked Tracee if she had any problems with the church. Tracee let her guard down, trying to be sympathetic towards her friend. She said, “Yes, I have a problem with polygamy.” Her friend asked her if she knew things about polygamy in the early church, and told her things that were very disturbing to Tracee. She said, “I told her that I didn’t know all these things, but she [the friend] knew what she was talking about. And I knew that she wouldn’t lie to me. When I heard about all these things about polygamy, I thought, I have to tell Rob!” As the luncheon progressed, Tracee learned things about Blacks and the priesthood that upset her greatly. Her friend told her that the reason the church finally gave the priesthood to Black men was that some universities were not willing to play BYU in athletic competitions because of the exclusionary policy the church held before 1978. When she got home, Tracee told Rob about all the things that she learned from her friend. Her husband, who had done his own research years ago, was not surprised. He already knew much of what Tracee told him. As they talked, she kept asking repeatedly, “Why didn’t you tell me?” Tracee claims that this information came as such a shock that she could not rest until she knew everything, all the background information about church that she was not taught in church.

“The first thing we did is to start listening to the *A Year of Polygamy* podcast,” said Rob.

⁵⁰ Rob and Tracee, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 6, 2017.

Tracee added, “we decided together that we needed to figure this stuff out. We needed to clear up all of our issues and then move forward. We never once considered leaving the church. Ever. And that is, I think, what hurt the most is that we had never considered that we could be wrong, that the church was not true.” Rob and Tracee sat down and decided what their issues were and how they were going to work them though them. Rob’s issues were completely different from Tracee’s issues. Tracee told the author, “Rob would research his issues and I would research my own issues. We listened to a lot of Mormon Stories podcasts and A Year of Polygamy. He would study on his breaks and I would study at home. We would come together at night and he would tell me the things he learned. I would tell him the things that I learned and we would cry over all these things.”

Tracee found out that Joseph Smith “was cheating on Emma and she was not okay with polygamy. She was bullied into being a polygamist. There was a revelation about how if Emma does not come on board with everything then she would be destroyed. That was terrible!” The author asked Rob and Tracee if they felt like they had been lied to by the church. Together they said, “Oh, yes! Absolutely!” Tracee added, “We felt completely betrayed and along with that came the anger.”⁵¹

For Wendy, Polygamy was a large item on her shelf. When she started to study the history of the church and the life of Joseph Smith, it all started to unravel for her.

I remember when I allowed myself to imagine that it [the church] might not be true. It was surreal. Through massive study with my husband, I realized it was not true, and I was mad! I had a lot of anger. I had to really work to get through that. I had to realize that it (the church) was all I had been taught my entire life and I didn’t know any better. I eventually felt relief and very peaceful. I was happy that it wasn’t true. I thought, okay! I don’t have to live up to all this. It was not that I wasn’t living up to the standards of the church. I did not leave because I wanted to sin. I thought to myself, I can’t believe that I believed all this for so long and was unhappy.⁵²

⁵¹ Rob and Tracee, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 6, 2017.

⁵² Wendy, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, May 19, 2017

For Steve and his wife, Chris, the problems with church history were by far the biggest impetus for their transition out of the church. Their transition started when Steve's friend told him about a book called, *Mormon Murders*. Steve said he was not much of a reader, but because his friend told him that the book was "a real page turner," Steve agreed to read it. Steve's friend told him that he was very upset with the church leaders because they "out and out lied. They pretended that they did not know who Mark Hoffman was, and pretended that they did not have a relationship with him." However, according to Steve's friend, it was well documented that the church did have dealings with Hoffman. In the book, the detectives had it all laid out. Steve said he knew about the Salamander Letter because, when he was at BYU, a friend of his had a copy of it. "When the church bought Hoffman's letter, they went about and were trying to collect all the copies. So, they knocked on my friend's door and said that they would like his copy of the Salamander Letter. My friend said 'No, this is mine and you can't have it!'"

When Steve read the book, he realized that Hoffman "was a smart cookie. He must have known the underbelly of the church so that he could craft that letter that would fit into the narrative of the church, but in a weird way. A Salamander talking to Joseph Smith was weird, but the church bought it! They swallowed the story. The church thought it was legitimate, and that made me think." Steve said that the whole idea that the church thought the Salamander Letter was legitimate fascinated him. He wondered how Hoffman got from being a missionary for the church to forging a document to dupe the church. The book that Steve was reading referred to Hoffman reading *No Man Knows My History*. At the time, Steve thought, "Oh, that is a bad book. You are not supposed to read that book, anytime, let alone on a mission." However,

Hoffman's reading of the book made Steve curious, so he bought the book himself. He said that he stayed up until 4:00 in the morning, every night, reading the book, reading the footnotes and sharing it with his wife, Chris. He would say, "Oh, man, I can't believe this is happening! I have never heard of this before." All the stuff in the book was brand new to him and he thought that it could not be true. He checked the references because he thought something must be wrong. All of the references checked out as legitimate. "Talk about doubting your doubts,"⁵³ Steve said. "I was doing just that as I was reading the book. I finished the book and I was just distraught. I didn't know what to do. It was consuming me." Steve's fatigue, depression, and angst came through at work. A co-worker asked him what was happening in his life and Steve admitted that he just finished reading *No Man Knows My History*. She told him that he should read *Mormon Enigma*, because the author is not so hard line about her opinion about what motivated Joseph Smith. That sounded reasonable to Steve, so he got the book and read it. At this point in the interview, Steve loudly yelled, "it was the SAME STUFF!" The book, *Mormon Enigma*, had the same information as Fawn Brodie's book, *No Man Knows My History*. Steve said that the theory was that Smith was drunk on power and thought he could get away with anything. All he had to do was say, "thus saith the Lord."

For Steve, reading these books was like standing in front of a leaking dyke. "And I was running out of fingers and toes to stick in all the holes. I thought that if this thing breaks, man that would be really bad news." Steve said that he did not want everything to fall apart in his religion. "What would that do to us?" he asked. Then, as he continued to read, he found out that Smith had extra-marital affairs behind Emma's back. He then convinced Emma that polygamy was God's word by pretending to receive a "revelation" that Emma would be destroyed if she

⁵³ Steve is referring to a talk given in talk from the 2013 General Conference of the Mormon church. It is entitled, "Come, Join with Us." <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>

didn't accept the principle of polygamy. After she decided that she had to accept this commandment, she approved the two girls Joseph should marry. However, he was already married to them. He went through another wedding ceremony with them to keep that information from Emma. "Gosh!" Steve said loudly, "that kind of stuff just messed me up! I finally said to myself, 'look at all the holes in this dyke. If the church isn't true, then it doesn't matter. I don't have to hold my fingers in the holes anymore and it could just break loose.' And it broke LOOSE!" At that moment, when Steve thought that the church was not true, he felt alive. "I felt like I had finally arrived. I thought, 'WOW! It wasn't me! All those thirty-three years, I have been trying to fit in and this thing has been so heavy, this mantle I was supposed to wear and feel comfortable in.' Once it fell way, I was just standing there going, wow, WOW! This feels great! I looked at myself in the mirror and said, 'Wow! I don't have to lie anymore.'"

Steve said he no longer felt the need to pretend to fit in or be accepted in the church. He could be himself. In that moment, he took his garments⁵⁴ off and never looked back.⁵⁵

Tina said she had no interest in deep church history. She had always had a problem with polygamy and some of the things that took place in the temple, but it was her husband and his disbelief that started her exit from the church. Tina's husband had been doubting for two years and he did not tell her because he thought that if he read and studied enough he would figure it all out. Tina said, "He didn't want to stress me out. He did not want to give me the pain of questioning, because it is very painful." Due to the death of a dear friend, Tina's husband became depressed and angry. "All the questions and issues (about the church) that he was dealing with and trying to just set aside, they were just raging in face. They could no longer be

⁵⁴ Faithful Mormons wear special underwear, called garments, to remind them of the promises they made in the temple.

⁵⁵ Steve and Chris, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, June 29, 2017.

ignored. He could not stuff it down anymore. It was all just bubbling up on the surface.”

Eventually, Tina’s husband told her that he no longer believed in the church. Tina relates what happened next. “I just lost it. I started to bawling, I was so upset, I was so scared, I was terrified. Instant fear!” The author asked her if she was so scared because she was afraid of losing her family. Tina replied with an empathic, “OH, YES! The first thought is my family, my children. What does this mean? I remember saying, ‘You know, I am not a good person to talk with about this because I am going to be very biased, I am going to have an agenda. I won’t want you to leave.’” Tina knew that she wanted him to have someone to talk to that was not going to be upset. “I knew I was going to be an emotional mess and I didn’t think that I was going to be a healthy outlet.”

Tina tried to find other believing Mormons that were close family or friends for her husband to talk to about his unbelief. One day, after they had visited with one of these people, her husband turned to her and said, “You know, one of the people that I really want to talk to is gone.” Tina realized that she was the one that he needed, not someone else, even though she was afraid. “I realized that I could not abandon him. I was shaking like crazy. I was so scared. This was the most difficult thing I ever had to say. To say, ‘okay, you can tell me everything, and I will listen. I will actually listen and not judge you for what you are saying...’” At this point, Tina’s husband told her everything that he learned about the church and she listened to all of it. “It was like an out of control wave of information. It was a life-changing thing. It was traumatic. It only took a month and I was out. It was very, very fast because I let him give me all the historical information about the church that he now knew to be true.” For Tina, it was not a slow trickle so she could absorb it easily. It was like a firehose. Her husband had read all the church essays, *Rough Stone Rolling*, and other books; He listened to all kinds of podcasts about

Mormonism. Tina said, “He is very intelligent and had been studying for two years. He had so much information. Later, (former Mormons) people would tell me things about the church and I would say, ‘I didn’t know that!’ And he would say, ‘Yup, I knew that one.’” Tina’s husband shared so many things with her that she was not able to pinpoint the one thing that made her want to leave the church. She said that it came down to honesty. “Everything that I was learning had dishonesty wrapped around it. So for me, who as a child and even as an adult was very obedient, following every rule, I felt like this (dishonesty) did not line up with my own morality.”⁵⁶

Arlene and Loreen, a married couple, both stated that traveling and teaching within the public school system allowed them to see that there were many good people outside the church. These people seemed to be very happy with their lives. Loreen wondered how it could be that they were not members of the church, but were still happy. Arlene said, “We are taught in church about a Father in Heaven who was loving, kind, compassionate and forgiving, and yet people (outside the church) were judged by how they lived and what they believed and what they did. How could God turn his back on all these people who did not have the church? He wouldn’t!” Arlene stated this emphatically. She went on to state, “I used my mom and dad as examples, and if he (God) were anything like them, he would never turn his back on his children, no matter what.”⁵⁷

Brandon said that he had, “problems with the church being the only true church. This did not ring true to me.” He had questions about confirmation bias, which prompted him to learn

⁵⁶ Tina, “Mormon Transition Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 2, 2017.

⁵⁷ Arlene and Loreen, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 2, 2017.

more about critical thinking and logic. “A big part of my transition is investigating religion in general and realizing that everyone believes that they are right and do not question.”⁵⁸

For Steven, his transition started when he was preparing to go on a mission. He told the author that he was “incredibly committed.” Steven did all the things he was told to do in order to prepare to serve a faithful mission. He read the Book of Mormon, spent time with the full-time missionaries, and fasted on extra Sundays. Steven realized that even after doing all of these things, there was no spiritual confirmation as to the veracity of the church. “I felt like I was broken, but the only solution for that was to go back to the method, to pray longer. Maybe I was not doing something right. Maybe I needed to study the scriptures better.” The author asked Steven, “So it was your problem that it was not working? Is that what you felt like?” Steven answered. “Correct. Something was wrong, but I was following the prescribed method.” However, he felt like it was not working. “Eventually, it came down to the point where I was pre-promising God that it does not matter what your will is, I will do it!” I promise that now!” He tried to find meaning in impressions and tried being grateful for everything. The tipping point for Steven was getting his Patriarchal Blessing. He said he felt nothing, no spiritual feelings at all. Steven stated with anguish in his voice, “If all of these things that I have been doing for a year have not allowed me to feel the spirit, and this patriarch is not able to say anything that helps at all, that seems at all inspired, and there is zero feeling of any kind, no feeling of any positive emotion that could even possibly be the spirit, then this is it. There is nothing here for me.”⁵⁹

Issues concerning the doctrine of the church and the accuracy of history within the church are varied, but as is obvious in the above section, polygamy and Joseph Smith are at the top of

⁵⁸ Brandon, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, July 31, 2017.

⁵⁹ Steven, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 12, 2017.

the list in this project. The issue of polygamy is especially painful to women. Almost every woman who participated in the project mentioned polygamy as an issue she had with church history. Not only were women in this project concerned about past polygamy in the church, but also for many women, they were worried that they would have to share their husbands in the next life. For these women, who now believe that polygamy was not of God, but devised by a man, Joseph Smith, who wanted to have an excuse to engage in sexual activities with women other than his wife, polygamy was the end of their belief in the church.⁶⁰

It is clear that participants who cited historical problems as the impetus for their exit from the church were not lazy. Some people, like Steven, followed the path that was supposed to lead to spirituality and happiness, only to be left thinking it was his fault when the prescription did not work for him. He eventually realized it was not his fault. Steven worked diligently to feel the spirit and follow the teachings of the church. It just did not lead to happiness for him.⁶¹

The church routinely warns its members not to look at anything but church approved sources when studying the gospel.⁶² If the church controls what people see and hear, they can more easily control what people think. The majority of the people in this project spent numerous hours studying the issues that were plaguing them using not only church resources, but also

⁶⁰ Anna, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, July 26, 2017, Cami, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 10, 2017, Tina, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, August 1, 2017, Wendy, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 19, 2017, Tracee, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, August 6, 2017. Pat, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 3, 2017, Karmyn, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 23, 2017, Jenn, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 23, 2017, Donny's wife, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, May 6, 2017, Kim, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, August 12, 2017.

⁶¹ Steven, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, August 12, 2017.

⁶² Benjamin Knoll, "Many Mormons Are Unaware of the Messy Details of LDS Church History," The Huffington Post, November 24, 2014, accessed October 29, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/benjamin-knoll/many-mormons-are-unaware-_b_6195784.html.

information outside of the religion. While some believers call this looking at anti-Mormon information, many of the people that studied these sources called them “evidence based.”⁶³

None of the participants in these oral histories presented in this section cited “wanting to sin” as the reason for their disaffection. In fact, the great majority of the people in this section were extremely active in the church. They had firm testimonies and were in leadership positions in their individual wards and stakes. In over half of the cases, the participant was looking for greater knowledge about the subject, for example, Cami’s lesson preparation for her Young Women’s class⁶⁴ and Dan’s desire to learn about Masonry because he knew Joseph Smith was a Mason.⁶⁵ In none of the cases did the participant indicate that they were offended.

Allowing herself to consider that the church might not be true was a turning point for Kim. As she said in her interview, “you step back and start looking at the doctrine and everything else and then you start seeing the cracks. I do not think you can start seeing the cracks until you allow yourself to step back. That is how it was for me.”⁶⁶

Cultural and Social Issues

This section addresses social and cultural issues the participants cited as the reason they eventually left Mormonism. This section includes one of the biggest issues cited in this study, which is the issue of the treatment of those in the homosexual community. Also included in this section are the issues of perfectionism, issues with leadership within the church and feminism.

⁶³ April, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, June 19, 2017, Steve and Chris, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, June 29, 2017, Dan (1) “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, May 19, 2017, Cami, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, May 10, 2017, Anna, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, July 26, 2017, Dan (2), “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, June 16, 2017, Steven, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 12, 2017, Kim and Worthy, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 14, 2017, Allen, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, June 3, 2017, Brandon, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, July 31, 2017.

⁶⁴ Cami, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, May 10, 2017.

⁶⁵ Dan, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, June 16, 2017.

⁶⁶ Kim and Worthy, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 14, 2017.

Andrea, who is an African American woman, had an issue with gender roles within the church. She did not realize that the Proclamation on the Family “was such a big deal,” when she joined the church as a convert while in college. After joining the church, Andrea began to feel depressed and disconnected from God. She felt nothing at the temple. She said the only men she felt connected with were “Jack Mormons.”⁶⁷ However, she wanted to have an eternal family, so she tried to connect her beliefs with the reality of what she wanted as a woman, but was unable to do so. “I really liked this guy (a Jack Mormon) and Mormon men and me don’t jive. I am a strong woman and can make my own decisions without having a man tell me what to do.” Andrea gave herself permission to disengage from the church. She did so in order to choose her own role as a woman. She wanted to find a man she could respect, one who would treat her as an equal.⁶⁸

For Loreen, who appeared earlier in this essay, the impetus for her transition was the church’s treatment of the LGBT community. She said that she realized in high school that she was gay, and had a relationship at Brigham Young University with a girl for a couple of years. When she went to the bishop to confess, he put her through aversion therapy. “I was forced to look at pictures of naked women and then drink syrup of ipecac to make me sick.” She tried to attend church on a regular basis, but it was emotionally difficult for her. She knew she was bisexual at this point, and could be with a man. She married, but always felt like she was living a double life. After her husband found out that she was drinking coffee at work, “that put the nail in the coffin of our relationship.” Loreen said. Eventually, Loreen met Arlene. Loreen said that was the end of trying to be a Mormon for her.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Jack Mormons are people who believe the teachings of the Mormon Church, but do not want to abide by the commandments of the church.

⁶⁸ Andrea, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, July 30, 2017.

⁶⁹ Arlene and Loreen, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 2, 2017.

Arlene, cited early in the other section, said that she never doubted that the church was true until she was on her mission. She did not want to go on a mission because deep inside she knew she was a lesbian. She thought that perhaps a mission could be a good bargaining chip with God. She prayed that God would take away her feelings of attraction to other women if she served a mission for Him. Then she started her paperwork and prepared to serve a mission. She thought it would be the ultimate of experiences, until she got there. She told the author that her mission was “freaking, damn weird.” Arlene said she was sexually attracted to some of her companions that she was with all the time, which proved that God did not listen to her prayers. She knew that her sexuality was not going to change, but she tried so hard to do what she was supposed to do. After her mission she came home and tried to marry a man, but “I just could not do it.” Arlene eventually left the church and married her wife, Loreen.⁷⁰

Daniel, also included earlier in the essay, told the author that his transition started when his parents were leaving the church. “I was pretty upset after my parents left the church.” However, “after that the church came out with the policy about the LGBT community, that the children of gay people who were living (married) with each other could not be baptized or receive the priesthood, etc. I was convinced they (his parents) were right about the church.” Daniel also said that, “now that my parents were not part of the church I saw that they were much happier, their marriage was a lot better, and they had a better outlook on life.” When Daniel’s girlfriend pressured him to go on a mission and commit to get married in the Mormon temple, he broke up with her. He said he did not like the pressure she was putting on him. “It was at this point that I realized how miserable the church makes people with all the pressure they heap upon them to follow this plan for life when it doesn’t work for most people.”

⁷⁰ Arlene and Loreen, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 2, 2017.

Suicide within the LGBT community was also an impetus for Daniel. He heard about numerous young people in his social group who took their own lives because, in Daniel's estimation, there was no place for them in the religion that they loved. They could not see a way to be happy in this life and be gay. He said that the church implicitly tells members of the LGBT community that they are not good enough the way they are, that they are bad because they want to have sex with the gender to which they are attracted. "It was heart breaking to me." Daniel said sadly.⁷¹

Donny and his wife, also part of the historical/doctrinal part of this essay, claimed that the way that Mormons behaved and treated people in church and in the workplace caused them to become disillusioned with what being a member of God's true church meant. Some of the Mormons they knew were doing illegal and immoral things, harming children and cheating on their wives. Donny's wife wondered how it could be that God was supposedly inspiring church leaders to call immoral and criminal people to become leaders in the church. This shook her faith enough to start to look at information about the church from outside sources. Donny said, "people can make mistakes, but own up to it and say you are sorry. These people would never say they were sorry." Donny's wife said that for people like her husband and herself, it did not seem possible that they could leave. They often served in bishoprics,⁷² presidencies in the auxiliary programs of the church, and in stake⁷³ callings.⁷⁴ "When you think about people leaving the church, your mind often goes to the idea that they are tired, sinful or lazy, or perhaps

⁷¹ Daniel, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, August 12, 2017.

⁷² A bishopric includes the highest leadership in in a ward, the bishop and his two councilors or assistants.

⁷³ Wards and branches are the smallest division of church groups within Mormonism. A stake has multiple wards and branches and is overseen by a stake presidency.

⁷⁴ A calling is an assignment that the bishop or stake leader "calls" a member of the ward to perform.

that they are reading anti-Mormon literature.” Donny’s wife said. “That was not the case for us.”⁷⁵

The church’s treatment of homosexuals was one of the reasons that Jace had for his evolving faith during his transition. “At 19, I was in a group of friends where one of our group was coming out as gay and the rest of us kind of shunned him. When I was twenty, it finally clicked and I thought, ‘Oh, there is nothing wrong with that. He is not deciding to be bad, that is just how he is, and that is okay. He deserves to be loved and accepted like anyone else.’”⁷⁶

Perfectionism is a huge problem within Mormonism. At the age of fourteen, Jessica felt as if the pressure to be the perfect Mormon girl was ruining her life. “I was trying to balance those two ways of thinking. There was so much shame trying to be myself, but also trying to be perfect Mormon girl because they didn’t go together.” Jessica wanted to avoid going to church, but her parents would not let her miss the meetings. If she did not go, her parents did not allow her to see her friends for the following week. She said that she felt blackmailed into staying in the church. “I was depressed, but I went so I could stay sane. I traded three hours of my Sunday for the freedom to be with my friends during the week.”

Although Jessica did not like her Sunday meetings, she did enjoy the weekly Young Women’s activities because some of the girls that came to the meetings thought similarly to the way Jessica thought. She also had wonderful leaders, who were non-judgmental and loving. “For a girl who was so depressed, even to the point of having suicidal thoughts, this was my saving grace to go to these activities.” The author asked Jessica, “You said you felt suicidal. Do you think feeling suicidal was connected to your feelings of imperfection and inadequacy that you

⁷⁵ Donny and his wife, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, May 6, 2017

⁷⁶ Jace, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, August 13, 2017.

couldn't be what you were expected to be?" She answered with a serious face, nodding her head. "Yeah, definitely. I think that Mormon beliefs did not help me with my depression. It was largely because my father would be verbally and emotionally abusive and it is still hard to shake now, the kinds of mantras he would say to me, how not good enough I was." At this point, Jessica got emotional. "I don't want to cry," she said. The author said, "No, don't cry!" and then they both laughed instead. Jessica reiterated that Mormonism did not help her to be happy because her father was there saying that she would never be good enough. According to Jessica he would say things like "You are such a bad daughter," and then "Mormonism is there saying, 'you have to be a good daughter, you have to be a good person.' And I was told that I wasn't." Jessica said that Mormonism did help her in one area. "...when I was suicidal, it convinced me not to take my life because I thought the consequences were pretty heavy, according to what the church teaches. So that helped a lot for me." The doctrine held within Mormonism made Jessica too afraid of what would happen to her if she killed herself.⁷⁷ Jessica left the church soon after moving out of her parent's home at eighteen.

For Kristen and Tom, a married couple, LGBT issues were the biggest reason they started to question the truthfulness of the church. Tom remembers the start of their disaffection well. "It was October 2010 and we were watching General Conference⁷⁸ on TV. (Boyd) Packer says his infamous words about why a loving God would create gay people.⁷⁹ Kristen had a very emotional response to that. If we would have had the money to replace our TV, she would have probably taken it off the wall and thrown it across the room." Kristen immediately said, "That

⁷⁷ Jessica, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, July 30, 2017.

⁷⁸ A twice-yearly conference for all members of the Mormon Church. Mormons can watch or listen to this conference all over the world.

⁷⁹ Peggy Fletcher Stack The Salt Lake Tribune, October 25, 2010 12:58 pm, "Packer talk jibes with LDS stance after tweak," The Salt Lake Tribune, October 25, 2010, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=50440474&itype=CMSID>.

was his [Packer's] prejudice. That did not come from God. That is what I kept saying." Tom reminded her, "You kept saying, 'that is wrong, that is wrong, that does not reflect love or kindness.' Kristen looked up at me and I was in shock. I was absolutely in shock. I couldn't believe what I heard. I couldn't rationalize it. That was a big thing for me because I was usually able to rationalize things. I usually had an answer or something." At the time, Tom thought that Packer was a man of God. He thought that he represented God, that he was his mouthpiece. Tom stated, "This jumpstarted a lot of things!" Tom started to research the church in earnest. He looked at the history of the church and LGBT issues. Like one of the other participants, Tom took the quote by J. Reuben Clark to heart. "If we have truth, it cannot be harmed by investigation. If we have not truth, it ought to be harmed."⁸⁰ Tom and his wife, Kristen, left the church together after they could no longer accept the teachings of the church regarding homosexuality and Mormonism.⁸¹

Rob and his wife, Tracee, also referenced above, told the story of one of their friends who had business dealings with the church. Both Rob and Tracee believe that the church acted immorally in this instance.

One of the other major things that was on both of our shelves was a friend of ours that was a developer and broke off from his partners to go on his own. He used a major part of his savings to buy land to develop. He bought a piece of land from the church. The church's real estate department knew that it was back-filled land, and could not be used to build on. They did not tell him that and he trusted them. They said, 'Well why didn't you research it?' He said, 'I trusted you, you are the church. I didn't think you would sell me a bad lot, you knew what my plans were.' The church drug that out for four or five years. He would have meetings with them and they would tell him, 'Well, there is the church side and there is the business side.' I was so angry about that. I said the church is the church, I don't care if it is the business side, you represent the church. He had to take the whole mess to the top, and finally got some of the money back, but it really hurt. Years later, it still hurt his family financially. His wife had to go to work, she has MS (Multiple Sclerosis) or some other disease and she had to work. It really was painful

⁸⁰ J. Reuben Clark, *The Charted Course of the Church in Education* (Salt Lake City, UT: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992).

⁸¹ Tom and Kristen, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, July 29, 2017.

for their family. For me, that was huge. It made me so mad because I am very much upfront. What you see is what you get from me, I am forward, I am honest, and for the church to do something like that when they have always preached to me that they (the church) does not do deals behind the back door, we do things out in the open. That was a huge issue for me. How can this happen under a prophet and the first presidency without them saying, 'No, right this?' This experience started shaking the ground a little.⁸²

Shane found the church's stand on gay marriage troubling. He said that this is what made him start to question in the beginning. "The church's involvement in Prop 8, the church fighting against same sex marriage in general, was a problem for me. As I got a better understanding about gays, it really bothered me that the church was trying to stop them from being married."⁸³

Mykel, who was a convert to the church at the age of fourteen, first realized that she was attracted to women when she was seventeen years old. "My first thought was okay, this is my natural man, and my natural man is an enemy to God. So I just needed to fight my natural man." Mikel, for whom the church was her family, decided to go to her bishop and tell him that she was experiencing same sex attraction. Her bishop was greatly concerned, but she thought he was more concerned than he needed to be. "This is a truth about me, but I am not going to do anything wrong. I am not going to forget about the church." One of the first things Mykel's bishop did was to tell her about Voices of Hope, an LDS program for people that are same sex attracted, but fight it through either celibacy or by marrying someone of the opposite gender, even if they were not attracted to them sexually. Mykel said that she remembers, "Asking him to show me how to live with being gay." Mykel relates that her beliefs in the church did not change at this point. "Honestly, when I first found out I was gay I was more upset with myself than I was with the church. The church was all that I had. This is me, this is my fault. This is my natural man. If I don't get this under control I am going to lose my God."

⁸² Rob and Tracee, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, August 6, 2017.

⁸³ Shane, "Mormon Transitions Project," Interviewed by the author, August 1, 2017.

As Mykel continued to meet with the bishop, she said that she was just trying to figure out how to live with her feelings. The biggest thing that she did not understand was the change in the church's policy that took place in November 2015.⁸⁴ The change was that children under 18, who were living with a parent who was living in what Mykel called, "A homosexual house," had to wait to receive any of the ordinances of the church until they were eighteen years old. They had to move out of the home and renounce the practice of homosexuality. The reason the church gives for this policy change was that they did not want to teach things to a child that were against what the adults in the home taught. The church did not want to cause conflict. Mykel thought that these reasons did not make sense to her. "My thought on this idea is that I got baptized when I was fourteen. I came from a household of addicts and drunks and abuse and so many different things that were different from what the church teaches." Mykel told the author that the church told her that she could be baptized at fourteen, then go to church, and listen to the leaders telling her that much of what her family did was wrong. Mykel asked, "Why does same sex attraction have so much more weight than drug addiction and abuse? Why does the church baptize children from those houses? That made no sense to me. And it infuriated me. It made me so mad because the missionaries never even asked my parents if I could be baptized because the abuse was not a problem."

At this point in the interview, the author asked Mykel, "Why would you want to stay in a church when, from all appearances, it seemed like there was not a place for people from the LGBT community?" Mykel answered with tears in her eyes. "Because I did not want to be a part of that community. I did not want that to be me. I did not want to lose the only thing that had

⁸⁴ "Elder Christofferson Says Handbook Changes Regarding Same-Sex Marriages Help Protect Children," Church News and Events, November 12, 2015, accessed October 29, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/elder-christofferson-says-handbook-changes-regarding-same-sex-marriages-help-protect-children?lang=eng>.

given me anything good in my life. Because up until the point that I joined the church, I had nothing else. I felt that the church was where my actual family was.” For Mykel, this was a dilemma. She could not see how she could be her true self and keep the religion and community that was so dear to her.

While meeting with the bishop one night, Mykel told him that she did not know what to do. She was still gay and she thought that one could not be gay and have a space in the church. According to Mykel, her bishop reinforced these ideas when he said, “we will always love you, regardless, but being actively gay is not something that you can do and be a part of the church as well.” Mykel said that she wanted to make sure that she said that her past bishop was a good man, with a big heart and that he sincerely wanted to help her. He just did not know how.

Mikel was so discouraged. She was trying so hard to “fix” herself and did not know why she could not do it. “I went straight from my bishop’s office to an overpass to go and try to kill myself. Because I knew that I was a disgrace to God and that I was a sinner. And I deserved to die.” At this point in the interview, both the author and Mykel are crying. It was a few minutes before they could compose themselves enough to continue. “What stopped you from jumping?” asked the author?” Mykel, her voice still hoarse from her tears said, “There were too many people around. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt or emotionally scarred because they saw me when I jumped. I called my therapist, she called the cops, and they took me to the hospital. It was a big mess. That is why I don’t believe in God anymore. My God brought me the closest to death I have ever been and left me there.” Mykel and the author take another moment to compose themselves, and then Mykel said, “I knew that in order for me to stay alive, I had to stop killing

myself over something that was hurting me. I had to leave and have a total break from the church.”⁸⁵

Social and cultural reasons for leaving Mormonism are often emotional. They are more personal than the former theme of historical and doctrinal issues. For the people who left the church for social and cultural reasons, the church was often a painful place for them. Leaving the church to protect themselves or to avoid pain is often misconstrued as being offended. In a study conducted by Jana Reiss, she addressed this difficult subject.⁸⁶ Reiss found that sometimes people do leave because they are offended, but they have a reason to feel offense. She cites Bednar’s 2006 talk given to the church, referenced earlier in this essay. Bednar gives examples of reasons people leave and names the people offended. Reiss writes that the reasons Bednar gives in his talk and the reasons that people gave in her study are on completely different levels of offence. Reiss said, “I take issue with some of the trivial examples for what this (being offended) looks like.”⁸⁷ In his conference talk, Bednar gives these examples:

1. “Several years ago a man said something in Sunday school that offended me, and I have not been back since.”
2. “No one in this branch greeted or reached out to me. I felt like an outsider. I was hurt by the unfriendliness of this branch.”
3. “I did not agree with the counsel the bishop gave me. I will not step foot in that building again as long as he is serving in that position.”⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Mykel, “Mormon Transitions Project,” Interviewed by the author, July 26, 2017.

⁸⁶ Jana Riess, “Do Mormons leave the Church because they ‘got offended’?” Religion News Service, January 27, 2017, accessed October 25, 2017, <http://religionnews.com/2017/01/27/do-mormons-leave-the-church-because-they-got-offended/>.

⁸⁷ IBID

⁸⁸ David A. Bednar, “And Nothing Shall Offend Them,” LDS.org, October 2006, accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2006/10/and-nothing-shall-offend-them?lang=eng>.

If these reasons were the only reason people gave for leaving the church, it would seem petty indeed. However, when comparing these small grievances to the reasons listed within the interviews included in this essay, the difference is clear. People are not leaving because of small offences. They are leaving to protect their emotional health, their relationships with LGBT family members, and sometimes their very lives. Are some of them offended? Certainly some of the people who leave feel that they are. However, the question arises as to whether they have a reason to feel the way they do or if they leave for superfluous reasons like those given in Bednar's talk. As Reiss stated in her article, "Sometimes, someone 'choosing to be offended' is actually a healthy and emotionally appropriate response to a harmful situation."⁸⁹ Sometimes, people must remove themselves in order to preserve their happiness, their families, and in some cases, their very lives.

In Conclusion

Clearly, people who choose to leave the church do so for many different reasons. It is also evident, according to the fifty-four individuals interviewed for this project that former Mormons do not leave for the reasons believing Mormons think that they do. People leave because they no longer feel they can trust the leadership of the church to tell them the truth. People leave because their morals and values do not line up with the way the church navigates LGBT issues. People leave because the narrow path prescribed by Mormonism does not work for them and they are happier outside of the church. There is no end to the reasons one might leave the church. Each person is different, and each has individual and hard won reasons for leaving.

⁸⁹ Jana Riess, "Do Mormons leave the Church because they 'got offended'?" Religion News Service, January 27, 2017, accessed October 25, 2017, <http://religionnews.com/2017/01/27/do-mormons-leave-the-church-because-they-got-offended/>.

Not all believing Mormons think the same way. Some believers understand that people leave for reasons that do not make sense to everyone, that leaving is a very personal choice and is not undertaken lightly. In a general meeting of faithful Mormons, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf proved this point when he said, "One might ask, 'If the gospel is so wonderful, why would anyone leave?' Sometimes we assume it is because they have been offended, lazy, or sinful. Actually, it is not that simple. In fact, there is not just one reason that applies to the variety of situations...Some struggle with unanswered questions about things that have been done or said in the past."⁹⁰ It is impossible truly to know the reasons people leave unless one asks them. Making general and stereotypical statements and applying them to everyone who has transitioned out of Mormonism is not beneficial to the process of understanding each other. Instead, it would be more beneficial to seek to understand, and as Uchtdorf suggests, refrain from assuming things about those that choose to leave the Mormonism.

⁹⁰ Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," LDS.org, October 2013, accessed October 25, 2017, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us?lang=eng>.

Addendum

Questions for Interview for Oral History Project

Brief Bio- First name, where you grew up, live now, married? Kids?

Where did you grow up?

When did you move to Utah?

What was your family's intro to the church?

Were you BIC or a convert? (conversion story?)

What was your family's level of orthodoxy?

Parent's activity?

What was it like growing up in the church?

Were you personally super active?

Seminary, mission, temple marriage?

Describe your belief during your childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, etc.

Did you ever feel like you received a confirmation that the Mormon church was true?

How was the church part of your identity?

How did the church help you with things like moral decisions?

Dealing with death?

Making decisions about health?

Who to associate with?

Do you feel that the church gave you a sense of meaning or purpose?

How did the church affect your belief in gender roles?

Did the church provide a sense of community? Spirituality?

What about your relationship with God?

Did you feel like your prayers were answered?

Do you think the church helped you to raise a happier family?

Do you think the church helped you to have chances to serve others?

What parts of the church were painful and/or challenging to you?

Did believe in the continuing revelation?

Modern day prophets?

One true church?

Historicity of the Book of Mormon?

Joseph Smith?

Did you have a “Shelf”?

Can you tell me about the beginning of your Faith Transition?

What was the thing that really started the ball rolling for you?

What was it like to realize that the church might not be true?

What feelings did you experience?

Anger, blame, fear, pain?

How did it affect your marriage?

What beliefs did your spouse hold when you were going through your crisis?

What made you want to study more about your?

As an unbeliever, how did you feel about leaving the church?

Do you remember when you were a believer and how you thought about people you knew or heard about that left?

What kept you in the church as long as you were in?

Family, work, fear?

What was your biggest fear about leaving?

What types of things did you read or listen to while on your journey out of the church?

Anti? Apologetics? Essays? Podcasts?

How instrumental do you think the internet is to Mormon transitions overall?

Did you have a time period when you still went as a non-believer?

How did that made you feel?

How have you handled your transition in regards to your children?

At what point did you decide to stop going?

To disassociate? To resign? Were you excommunicated?

What was that like?

Did the transition happen at different times for different people in the family?

How did you come out to your spouse? Children? Siblings? Parents? Extended family and friends?

How did people respond when you told them?

What types of things do you do now that you didn't before?

Has your political ideology changed?

Moral ideology?

What feelings did you have as your separation from the church progressed?

Feelings at first?

After angry phase? If you had one.

Did you have a missionary phase?

Did you find yourself feeling a need for a new community?

Have you joined any other religious tradition or community?

How did your old ward treat you?

What were the hardest parts of disbelief and leaving?

Best parts of disbelief and leaving?

How do you deal with issues like death, morality, drugs, sex etc now that you are out?

How has it changed your relationships?

Do you think your children are better off now?

What suggestions do you have for people that are going through a faith transition?

Do you have beliefs that you would like to share?

Thoughts about God, Satan, Jesus, scriptures, Joseph Smith, Church, religion in general, last words?

Consent Form

Oral History Project - Informed Consent

This project involves research. The purpose of the research is to learn about the experiences people have while going through a faith transition out of the Mormon religion. Interviews are the main part of this project. You are being included in this project because you volunteered and you are between the ages of 18-65 and not pregnant.

Interview information

If you participate in this project:

- You will be one of one hundred persons interviewed.
- Will not be pregnant.
- Your interview will last from approximately one hour to 90 minutes.
- You will be asked questions about your background concerning religion, your former activity levels, your transition, how it affected you in many areas of your life including how it affected/affects your family, your career, and associations in your community.
- The questions will be provided in advance. If you don't want to answer some of the questions you can let the interviewer know in advance and the subject will not be included.
- Your interview will be audio recorded.
- There is no compensation for this interview and there will be no financial help with mental health counselling if it is needed following your participation.

Your risks and benefits

If you participate in this project:

- You may find that you experience emotional upheaval and/or stress.
- You may have the satisfaction of knowing that you are helping with research regarding mental health and faith transitions out of Mormonism.
- You may find that participating in the interview is cathartic, helping you to process the feelings and emotions of your transition.

- If you need to stop the interview at any time there will be no penalty or problem. If you find that you have emotional problems that need mental health counselling, please let the interviewer know and you will be referred to a mental health clinic. The university nor the students or teacher involved will be held financially responsible.

Your rights

This project is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. You may stop your participation at any time during the interview. If you do not want to be identified by name, we will assign you a number and you will not be asked specific questions about the identification of your family, relatives, or other people you talk about in your interview. Your contact information such as address and telephone will not be disclosed to the public. If you choose not to participate, there are no repercussions.

Deposit of materials

- You agree to have the final audio version of this interview stored at the Oral History Archives of Utah Valley University as well as the Integrated Studies Department at Utah Valley University. You will need to sign a release form for the Oral History Archives of UVU before this can be done. The audio version will be available for use by researchers, teachers, and students, or other members of the public. The information in the interviews may be displayed publicly or published.
- The audio recording may be available for use by researchers, teachers, students, or other members of the public. Their results may be displayed publicly or published. (Note: You may choose not to have your audio recording deposited in the Archives. The audio recording of your interview will be deleted after the information is studied for research. If you choose not to include your interview in the archives, the researcher and her mentor will be the other people who hear your interview.)

Participants can contact the researcher at (801) 471-5622 or at kchapamanprovo@gmail.com

Yes _No _I consent to the use of my name.

Yes _No I consent to the deposit of the audio recording in the Oral History Archives of Utah Valley

University and I understand that I will have to sign their Release Form.

I have read the contents of this consent form and I understand it. I have been encouraged to ask questions and I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study and I have indicated above my choices for participation or not in the certain activities of this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this consent form.

Name: (Please print)			
Telephone:			
Address:			
Signature:		Date:	