

We're Christians too: A Mormon perspective

by [Jana Riess](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

Like Mitt Romney, I'm a Mormon, and as with him my Mormonism seems to be a defining, make-or-break characteristic for many people I meet. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has made great strides in the past decade at improving its public image, partly as a result of an extensive and expensive PR effort. At the end of the day, though, polls show fairly consistently that we Mormons still rank near the bottom when Americans are giving "approval ratings" to religions. Many Americans report that they would never vote for a Mormon for national office.

That's fair enough, but I wish that America would at least judge us on the basis of what we actually believe and do, rather than what America apparently thinks we believe and do. With that in mind, here are five things that I wish mainline Protestants understood about Mormons.

We are not all idiots. I say "all" because, well, some of us *are* idiots. But I'd be willing to wager that the ignorance ratio among Mormons is no higher than that among other religious groups in America. In fact, I'd venture to say that it may be a little lower, since Mormons are statistically more likely to have a college degree than the general population.

I do realize that many of the things that Mormons believe sound preposterous to mainline Protestants. I am a convert to Mormonism, and those beliefs once sounded ludicrous to me too. But it's not like Latter-day Saints have a monopoly on hard-to-swallow religious teachings.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to speak at a writers' conference at a Christian college in the Midwest and was escorted around by the kindly provost and his wife. The provost asked me about the books I had written, and I mentioned the most recent, *Mormonism for Dummies*, which I had coauthored. He repeated the title and said, "Well, you'd have to be a dummy, wouldn't you?" In his mind, any person would have to be an idiot to believe that Joseph Smith was a prophet and the Book

of Mormon an inspired work of scripture. So, for the record, let me say that I believe those things, and I don't think I am a dummy.

We are not still practicing polygamy. I bring this up because it just keeps coming up. This spring I taught a Sunday school class about Mormonism to the youth at my husband's Episcopal congregation. They were doing an introductory series on world religions and invited practitioners of various religions to speak—the best possible way to do it. I started the lesson with a diagnostic quiz on what they already knew about Mormonism, including this question: “Mormons banned the practice of polygamy in: (a) 1890; (b) 1980; (c) 1999; or (d) Mormons still practice polygamy—I saw it on *Big Love*.”

My husband and the youth leader were the only takers on the correct answer, which is (a). Most of the kids thought polygamy had been abandoned very recently, and one thought it was still going on.

The HBO series *Big Love*, while an excellent drama, is not about members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The polygamy that is practiced today in Utah is done by offshoot groups that began in the late 19th century when the mainstream LDS Church abandoned the practice. Today, any LDS Church members who try to practice plural marriage are excommunicated. I'm amazed at how many times we have to keep explaining this point to non-Mormons, who seem to imagine that I have a far more extraordinary family life than I actually do.

We are not all Republicans. Statistically, most Mormons do vote Republican. This fact is so entrenched that Republican presidential candidates sometimes do not even visit Utah during their campaigns. Though LDS dominance is slowly decreasing in Utah, the state was still 62 percent Mormon in 2004, and it has gone Republican in every presidential election since 1964. It's as close to a sure thing as one gets in American politics.

But there is a vocal (and, in these polarized times, growing) minority of Mormons who lean toward the Democratic Party.

We're Christians. We're Christians. We're Christians. If mere belief in Jesus Christ as savior is enough, then Mormons definitely make the cut, since that's our core. But if the litmus test is trinitarian theology, we don't pass muster: Mormons do not believe in the Trinity. But then neither do Jesus-only Pentecostals. Aren't they Christians?

And then there's the thorny question of scripture. Some people have told us that we can't be real Christians because we uphold other books, like the Book of Mormon, as scripture in addition to the Bible.

Perhaps it's time for some new nomenclature. Just as we have Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims, can't we have Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant and Mormon Christians? And perhaps we can give those various Christians the benefit of the doubt: if they want to follow Christ's teachings and example, they should be able to call themselves Christians. Period.

We have something to offer. Just as Mormons have learned—and should continue learning—from Protestant Christians (particularly about grace, true worship, and inclusivity), we have some things to bring to the table of American Christianity. Sometimes Protestants look to the energy of Mormonism, now 13 million strong, and wonder what we have that's so darn appealing.

Here is one thing that's attractive: high expectations. I attend a lot of Protestant services and I graduated from a Protestant seminary, and I see my pastor friends shouldering tremendous burdens for everyone and everything. In the LDS Church, each individual has a job to do, from teaching a particular class or organizing lay visitation to coordinating the youth programs or running the library. We are prayed over and set apart for these callings, even for ones that seem minor. After a couple of years, jobs are generally switched around to let people try something new. It's not a perfect system, but it's an awfully valuable laboratory for spiritual growth.

While not fully adopting a Mormon model, which has no paid ministry, Protestant churches should give members more explicitly outlined responsibilities, so that the same 10 percent of the congregants don't wind up doing 90 percent of the work. Protestant churchgoers should not just be gently encouraged to donate what they feel comfortable giving, but should be taught to work up to giving a full tithe. Youth should be offered a distinctive Christian identity based on regular practices of devotion and sacrifice; they need to know that God makes daily demands on their time, money and talents. Mainline Protestants do a better job than any other Christians I know at teaching people about God's love and justice. But from the Mormon perspective, knowing that God loves us is only the first step: we are disciples in the making, and much is required of us.

America was barely ready for a Catholic president in 1960. It may not be ready for a Mormon president in 2008, but it is certainly far closer now than it was in 1968,

when Mitt Romney's father, George, made a bid for the presidency. Mitt Romney is going to raise a lot of money and attract a good deal of attention in this campaign. My hunch is that he will pave the way for someone else down the road (perhaps Romney himself in a second run). In any case, one thing is clear: Mormons are here to stay, both in American religion and in national public life.