

Mormons launch group to defend faith against media attacks

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SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) With two Mormons in the presidential campaign and a hit Broadway show about LDS missionaries, a group of church loyalists felt the time was ripe to begin scrutinizing media reports for inaccuracies about the Utah-based faith.

On Thursday (Aug.4) the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR) announced that it was launching the Mormon Defense League (MDL) to help journalists "get it right," said Scott Gordon, FAIR's president, who will direct the new project.

If the MDL notices a misstatement or mischaracterization, the group will first contact the journalist, Gordon said. But if a pattern of misrepresentation emerges, the defense league will "go after the writer" by posting the piece or pieces on its website (mdl.org) and pointing out the errors.

In this effort, the MDL will mirror the work of the church's own Public Affairs Department. In recent weeks, for example, department head Michael Otterson, a regular contributor to The Washington Post, decried journalists' use of the word "cult" to describe Mormonism. During the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, the church posted articles it viewed as inaccurate, spelling out the mistakes.

On Thursday, the LDS Church welcomed any "sincere efforts to correct misconceptions and inaccuracies about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," spokesman Scott Trotter said, but emphasized that

"FAIR is neither sponsored nor endorsed by the [LDS] Church."

Joanna Brooks, a Mormon writer who teaches English and comparative literature at San Diego State University, believes it will be good for the LDS Church "not to be the one to respond every time a crackpot takes a shot at the church," and she applauds the move for "an independent voice to respond to crude anti-Mormonism" in any media report.

But Brooks worries about what kinds of news pieces the MDL will critique.

"We misdirect our energy when we respond defensively to legitimate questions and criticisms of controversial church positions," she said.

"We can't be part of civil society unless we respond candidly. The price of admission is forthrightness."

FAIR itself began in 1997 primarily as a defender of the faith. Participants, each with expertise in aspects of Mormonism, found each other on message boards dealing with controversial issues such as polygamy, the role of women in the church, homosexuality, the exclusion of black men from the faith's all-male priesthood until 1978 and problems with the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

Those writers, located in various states, seemed to answer the same questions and criticisms over and over. So they pooled their respective research and thinking into one website (fairlds.org), which became the nucleus of FAIR.

In 2001, FAIR focused its energies on Mormons themselves, giving believers information and tools to explain all these issues to friends and neighbors.

"We made a conscious decision to stop reacting," Gordon said Thursday. "Now we hope to help shape the national conversation about Mormonism."

FAIR's new defense league is aimed at journalists and non-Mormons and is modeled after the Anti-Defamation League, created in 1913 "to stop the defamation of the Jewish people and to secure justice and fair

treatment to all."