

Now official: Mormons may drink Coke, Pepsi

by [Peggy Fletcher Stack](#) in the [October 3, 2012](#) issue

Perhaps reporters, bloggers, outsiders and even many Mormons will now acknowledge that the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not forbid drinking cola.

The LDS Church posted a statement August 29 on its website, saying that “the church does not prohibit the use of caffeine” and that the faith’s health-code reference to prohibiting “hot drinks” “does not go beyond [tea and coffee].” A day later, the website wording was slightly softened, saying only that “the church revelation spelling out health practices . . . does not mention the use of caffeine.”

The same goes for the church’s two-volume handbook, which LDS Church leaders use to guide their congregations. It says plainly that “the only official interpretation of ‘hot drinks’ . . . in the Word of Wisdom is the statement made by early church leaders that the term ‘hot drinks’ means tea and coffee.”

As former Utah governor Olene Walker, a Mormon, once told comedian Bill Cosby, “Caffeine is fine as long as it’s cold.”

That doesn’t mean that church leaders view caffeinated drinks as healthy. They just don’t bar members from, say, imbibing a Pepsi, downing a Mountain Dew or sipping a hot chocolate. Even GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney has been seen drinking an occasional Diet Coke.

The recent clarification on caffeine “is long overdue,” said Matthew Jorgensen, a Mormon and longtime Mountain Dew drinker.

Jorgensen, who is doing a two-year research fellowship in Germany, grew up “in a devout Mormon household, in a small, devout Mormon town,” where his neighbors and church leaders viewed “drinking a Coca-Cola as so close to drinking coffee that it made your worthiness . . . questionable.”

That view was magnified when the late LDS Church president Gordon B. Hinckley offhandedly told *60 Minutes* that Mormons avoid caffeine. Several earlier LDS Church leaders, including apostle Bruce R. McConkie, considered drinking Coke a violation of the “spirit” of the Word of Wisdom, which was dictated in 1833 by Mormon founder Joseph Smith. It bars consumption of wine, strong drinks (alcohol), tobacco and “hot drinks,” which have been defined by church authorities as tea and coffee.

Even so, many outsiders and plenty of insiders get that wrong. Journalists—from *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd to the Associated Press—have often stated that Mormons don’t drink caffeine. Recently, an hourlong NBC News feature on Mormonism made the same mistake, prompting the church’s initial statement on its website.

Part of the confusion stems from LDS Church-owned Brigham Young University, which neither sells nor serves caffeinated drinks. But BYU spokeswoman Carri Jenkins explains that is “not a university or church decision, but [one] made by dining services, based on what our customers want.” There has not “been a demand for it,” Jenkins said. “We are constantly evaluating what those needs and desires are.”

Indeed, fully caffeinated colas are available in the church’s Joseph Smith Memorial Building and in the Lion House Pantry, next to the faith’s headquarters in downtown Salt Lake City.

In the end, it’s up to individual Latter-day Saints to decide what to drink.

“I can understand why the church is cautious,” Jorgensen, the Mountain Dew drinker, wrote in an e-mail. “Saying that caffeine is OK might sound like saying that caffeine is healthy, maybe even an endorsement of caffeine. Plus, I think members need opportunities to work through questions of right and wrong for themselves.”

Caffeine, he said, “is the perfect, low-risk testing ground for members to make decisions for themselves.” —*Salt Lake Tribune*