

Erasure, Alienation and Otherness for Queer members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

I sat, in my usual seat on the third row from the back, in a crowded church hall, and listened to a group of around 20 children sing “Families can be together forever”.¹ Having been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints for a little over a year of my three year indoctrination, I knew the importance of eternity. Families, which follow the doctrines of our Heavenly Father, could continue to live together not just until death do us part but for now and until the end of time. However, I knew that for me and thousands of other Queer members of the church, this was not true. Our families would continue to be rejected and marginalised. Our families would live with separation, isolation and alienation. Our families wouldn’t even be considered entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, in fact, they wouldn’t even be considered families as all.

The LDS church (henceforth called by their nickname “Mormons”) have had a simple and blunt approach to the matter of sexuality and gender since their conception in 1830. 1) Don’t ask questions and 2) Don’t deviate from doctrine. This approach has largely stayed the same even into the 21st century. However, in a world with an increasing acceptance of the Queer experience, the Mormon Church has had to change tact. Instead developing policy, doctrine and language into even more damaging forms of “otherness”. Stemming from my own experience within the Mormon Church, I wish to explore damaging policy shifts which are often cited as the reason for Utah (the US state where most Mormons reside) to have a 141% increase in teen suicide rates in the last ten years.²

In October 2015, the leadership of the church (entitled the First Presidency) made up of the Prophet and his two apostolic advisors, slipped in a change of policy that went, for much of the membership, unnoticed. For Queer Mormons, it was a striking blow, a clear sign from God’s literal mouthpiece on Earth that “you are not welcome here”. The policy stated that those who were in a same-sex relationship were in a state of apostasy (a buzz word used by the Mormons to relate to any “lifestyle” so heinous as to ignore the commandments of our Heavenly Father). The policy went on to bar the baptism of any child produced by such a relationship until that child turned 18. Even when they were baptised, they were to declare that they understood the rebellious and sinful nature of their parent’s relationship.

The First Presidency argued that the policy came from love and was made to increase love in the family (the most important concept to the Mormons). They argued, that if a child were to live the lifestyle, the correct lifestyle, of the church they would end up arguing with their parents who lived in sin. This argument, when relayed to me, immediately made zero sense. I sat in my Bishop’s office, the voluntary leader of a church community, who knew no better than I did having received no formal training and was baffled. How could they argue this and yet allow me, the 16-year-old son of swearing, alcohol drinking, tea drinking, smoking parents to get baptised. My parents lived “contrary to the gospel” in every single way, the only difference? They were straight. It is clear that this policy was less about love and more about one rule for some and another for the rest. The policy was not about love but about the removal of all Queer narratives from the church.

This policy has, as of April 2019, been lifted. Those who live in homosexual relationships are not considered to be Apostates any longer “although it is still considered ‘a serious transgression.’”³

1 Ruth Gardner, ‘Families can be together forever’, 1980
<<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/music/library/childrens-songbook/families-can-be-together-forever?lang=eng>> [DATE ACCESSED: 26/03/2020]

2 Lee Hale, ‘Can the LDS Church be blamed for Utah’s LGBT suicides?’, 2018
<<https://www.kuer.org/post/can-lds-church-be-blamed-utah-s-lgbt-suicides#stream/0>> [DATE ACCESSED; 22/03/2020], p. 2-31

3 Sarah Weaver, ‘Policy Changes Announced for Members in Gay Marriages, Children of LGBT Parents’, 2019 <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/policy-changes->

However, it is clear that the new change is not a move towards inclusion but instead a move towards erasure. Instead, church leaders and Sunday School teachers are instructed to never bring up in conversation topics which would detract from the spirit of learning and Christ. Essentially, 'don't talk about it'.

This behaviour has been seen yet again more recently in the Mormon run college, Brigham Young University. BYU is run with a strict "Honor Code" which prevents male students from having beards, parties after 10 or even sex on campus. Of course, this has forever included paragraphs which prevent any kind of homosexual relationship to take place. Recently the Honor Code has been changed and those paragraphs removed. For a few short weeks Queer Mormons everywhere rejoiced, finally they would be able to hold hands with their partners just like their fellow, straight, students. This was until Elder Johnson released a statement which read "Same-sex romantic behaviour cannot lead to eternal marriage and is therefore not compatible with the principles included in the Honor Code."⁴ So, we see again, that it not about inclusion but instead about the Mormons using policy and language, or the lack thereof, to erase the Queerness of its population.

It is clear that the Mormons are not willing to even consider discussing where Queer members could fit within the landscape of the modern church. Queer Mormons are continuously erased in moves that would seem to include them and yet make them even more alien and 'othered'. Even the Leader of the church, a prophet preaching Christ's message of love and acceptance, made clear in his latest message that dissenters are not welcome, "The time is coming when those who do not obey the Lord will be separated from those who do".⁵ A far departure from what Mormons are taught as children in the song "Families can be together forever".

As one Queer member once said to me "There are moments I sink in despair and tears come", I know this is the same for my own experience. This message of exclusion and erasure is not going to end anytime soon. Not when the general population and leadership of the church commit to ignoring the plight of Queer Mormons, even relishing in it. All we can do now, is make sure the rest of the world knows what it is like for LGBTQ+ members of the church and hope that soon, Christ's message of love, acceptance and tolerance will reach the Prophet's ears.

[announced-for-members-in-gay-marriages-children-of-lgbt-parents?lang=eng](#)> P. 2-28
[DATE ACCESSED: 26/03/2020]

4 The Out Foundation, 'Our Response to the Honor Code Changes', 2020
<<https://www.theout.foundation/news/2020/3/4/our-response-to-the-honor-code-changes>
> P 5-9 [DATE ACCESSED:26/03/2020]

5 Russell M. Nelson, 'The Future of the Church: Preparing the World for the Savior's Second Coming', 2020 <<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2020/04/the-future-of-the-church-preparing-the-world-for-the-saviors-second-coming?lang=eng>> P 9-32 [DATE ACCESSED: 26/03/2020]