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LDS Church Essays Tackles Controversial Issues

Posted by [Stephen Smoot](#) | [1 comment](#)

In a fireside devotional given at Utah State University in November 2011, Elder Marlin K. Jensen, an emeritus Seventy and former Church Historian and Recorder for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, included a question and answer segment in his remarks. During this Q&A, one member of the audience asked about the concerning trend of Church members, particularly younger members, leaving the Church over controversial historical issues they encounter online and elsewhere. “Is the Church aware of that problem?” the questioner asked. “What about people who are already leaving in droves?” Jensen’s response to this question has gone viral, having been reported in the press and discussed on a number of blogs and other sites. “The fifteen men that are above me in the hierarchy of the Church . . . really do know. And they really care. And they realize that, maybe, since Kirtland we’ve never had a period of—I’ll call it apostasy—like we’re having right now, largely over these issues.” Jensen then explained that the Church was then in the process of creating resources to address these concerns. “So we are trying to create an offering that will address these issues and be available for the public at large and to people who are losing their faith or have lost it.”

The first fruits of this offering have surfaced in the form of a series of online articles posted on [lds.org](#), the Church’s official website, addressing sensitive issues related to Mormon history. The essays released thus far have addressed the following topics: Joseph Smith’s accounts of his [First Vision](#), [race and the priesthood](#) ([see also...](#)) the relationship between Mormonism and mainstream [Christianity](#), the [Book of Mormon](#) translation process, the practice of [plural marriage](#) in the early Church, and [DNA studies](#) and the Book of Mormon. Online rumors have circulated about what possible topics future essays might address, but it would be wise to eschew such gossip until more reliable sources can confirm what work is actually forthcoming.

As explained by Elder Steven E. Snow, Jensen’s successor as Church Historian and Recorder, the process of the creation of these articles has involved Mormon historians and scholars as well as General Authorities. In a [video](#) posted on lds.org Snow briefly clarified the process of the creation of the articles. “We have actually retained . . . scholars . . . to do some very extensive research. They’ve then submitted a draft of their paper to a committee of historians here in the Church History Department as well as General Authorities who’ve reviewed their work [and] suggested some edits. Those edits are made with the permission of the original writer, and that’s then submitted to the presiding quorums of the Church, the Twelve and the First Presidency, for approval. And then it’s published in Gospel Topics.” As reported by the [Deseret News](#), one of the main purposes of these essays, according to Snow, is to address concerns of transparency in how the Church portrays its history. “The young people, particularly, they’ll get on one [Internet] site, and they’ll say, ‘Well, I didn’t ever hear that.’ . . . And then that’ll lead them to another. And they just keep going. And then there’s this credibility issue that begins about, ‘What else is the church hiding?’ Well, we’re not hiding anything. . . . I think in this day and age it’s become apparent that we really do need to provide a series of answers that will help our members better understand these chapters of our history.”

The essays have generated much discussion on many parts of the Internet. Scott Gordon, president of FairMormon, an online apologetic group that defends the Church, endorses the new essays. “I think these new essays are fantastic,” Gordon said. “Truthfully, the content is what has been said by scholars for many years, but by putting it up on LDS.org it now makes it more accessible. It adds a level of credibility, as we know these articles have been reviewed and approved [by Church authorities].” Others, such as John Dehlin, proprietor of the popular

Mormon Stories podcast, are also positive about the essays. “I think that the essays are definitely a positive step forward,” Dehlin said. “I cannot help but wish that the church would have taken these steps a few decades ago (instead of punishing the scholars who first brought these issues to light), but courtesy requires an acknowledgment of this positive step forward.”

Discussion about the essays has also cropped up among BYU students and faculty. One BYU student, Stuart Bevan, a senior from Salt Lake City, expressed his excitement over the new essays. “My thoughts are overwhelmingly positive about the essays that the church is putting out in an effort to become more transparent,” Bevan said. “It seems that the Church has figured out how useful the Internet can be, and how to make information about any topic available to the masses. These essays, I hope, will help members not only going through a faith crisis, but also members who just want learn more about topics that are relevant to the Church.” Richard E. Bennett, president of the Mormon History Association and chair of the Department of Church History and Doctrine at BYU, also emphasized the importance of these articles in the Internet age. “The essays clearly meet a need in the Internet age, where so many questions are discussed in the open air,” Bennett said. “You can’t just let these things slide anymore with so many people asking so many questions.” Bennett went on to comment that he thinks the release of these essays is “a courageous move” on the part of the Church, as “they might not answer every question and may raise even more questions. But it will be good for those who look to the leadership of the Church for some input on the matter.”

The question still remains, however, as to how widely these essays are going to be noticed by general Church membership. While some of the issues raised in the essays, such as Joseph Smith’s different accounts of his First Vision and his use of a [seer stone](#) to receive revelation, have been discussed openly in Church publications such as the *Ensign*, other topics, such as the history of plural marriage, have, until recently, had little to no attention devoted to them in Church curriculum. “One of the claims of critics is that the Church hides these difficult issues,” Gordon said. “While I believe that is not true, information on some of these issues was more difficult to find so it fed that narrative. Those with a wavering faith not only had to deal with the issue itself, but also with the perception of dishonestly.” With the release of these essays, Dehlin commented, “from the Church’s perspective people will no longer be able to claim (quite as easily) that the church is avoiding or hiding its more difficult historical or doctrinal issues.” Bennett made a similar point by noting that the essays “dispel the myth that we’ve had something to hide. There hasn’t been an attempt to hide these things, as there hasn’t been much of a need to discuss these issues until now.”

Likewise, it remains to be seen how these essays will impact members of the Church who are going through a crisis of faith over these kinds of issues. While part of the purpose of the articles, according to Jensen and Snow, is to help Church members who struggle with their faith, Dehlin is skeptical of their intended effectiveness. “I am not sure that the essays will likely make much of a positive difference in terms of helping people stay in the church,” Dehlin said of individuals who have either left or are considering leaving the Church over these issues. “In my experience, for every one person that is helped by LDS apologetics, another two to three are either exposed to issues they would have otherwise never encountered . . . or are wholly dissatisfied with the apologetic answers. . . . Overall, I believe that an objective review of the history/evidence leads much more often to disbelief than to belief.”

Bennett, however, disagrees. “Those who really understand the history of the Church know that there are no hidden skeletons in the closet,” Bennett said. “It’s true that we’ve made mistakes in our past, but that does not invalidate the gospel itself.” Bennett also expressed his disagreement with those whom he believes use controversial aspects of Church history to create doubt in members. “There are no hidden ammunition dumps in Church history,” Bennett insisted. “Critics of the Church bring their own ammunition with them. They import their own disbelief, project it onto Church history and then use it to cause doubt. There are certainly moments of sometimes great disappointment in Church history, especially with how some members have failed to live their lives according to Church teachings, but that doesn’t diminish the truths of the gospel itself.”

Incidentally, these articles are not the only materials recently released by the Church that attempt to tackle controversial issues in Church history. As I have noted [elsewhere](#), in what seems to be an attempt to introduce these sensitive issues in a faith-promoting environment, the Church has recently updated its seminary manual on the Doctrine and Covenants and Church History to include discussions of such topics as Joseph Smith’s practice of plural marriage and the past restriction of the priesthood to black Church members.

Whatever one thinks about the content of the essays themselves, and whether one is persuaded by the answers given by the Church to the issues being addressed, the mere presence of these articles seems to indicate that the Church is taking steps to becoming more transparent with its history. “Having experienced it first hand,” Bevan, who has interned with the Joseph Smith Papers Project, said, “the work going on at the Church History department is incredible. True historians and scholars are working to bring to light as many things as possible concerning the Church and its history. Not only the online essays but also other publications have greatly improved the Church’s transparency. The essays are a step in the right direction for the church, and I hope it keeps taking these steps.”