

“MORMON”: A JOURNALIST’S DILEMMA

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I have worked at *The Salt Lake Tribune* for nearly twenty-eight years, after being hired November 4, 1991 as a full-time religion writer. So my only beat for twenty-seven years has been religion, and, as you might guess, it’s because it’s been a tricky beat: I love it, it’s fabulous, it’s the most interesting beat you could ever want, but it’s also fraught with danger, and no one at the paper gets more hate mail than I do. As a journalist covering religion, I have worked towards three particular values: one, respect for all faiths; two, taking no sides in truth claims; and three, clarity. I may have my own religious bias—of course I do—but I’m expected to keep those at bay as best as I can. Of course, the biggest faith I do cover is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints whose headquarters is in Salt Lake City, not very far from my office, but whose reach is global. I don’t only write about Church members and trends in the state of Utah, but really the world is my beat.

I have now written more than 5000 articles for *The Salt Lake Tribune* and of those maybe 3500 were about the Utah-based Church. So, you might suppose that when President Russell M. Nelson requested that all media use the full name of the Church on first reference, and “the restored Church of Jesus Christ” or just “the Church of Jesus Christ” on the second reference, and lose Mormon and LDS, it had an immediate impact on my work. The second reference request, though, challenges all three of my values—starting with respect. In his original statement—and also in his General Conference address—President Nelson insisted any media that truly respected the Church would make this change. As a journalist, it is my goal to respect faith and to respect what people want to be called, what organizations want to be called, and how individuals self-identify.

We're always going back and forth about African-American versus black, what do people want to be called? There's lots of talk about the pronouns having to do with transgender individuals, and we try our best to be sensitive and aware, but we have to be careful if it causes confusion among our readers. When it comes to faith, we do not write only for members of the LDS Church, we write for everyone. We have to be clear about what group we're discussing. What Church of Jesus Christ are we talking about? If President Donald Trump wanted us to call him "His Holiness" on the second reference, we wouldn't do it, given that is the term Tibetans apply to the Dalai Lama. Not that there would be big confusion between President Trump and the Dalai Lama, but it just wouldn't be appropriate. Even if he asked us to, we wouldn't do that. I guess I bristled a little bit at the suggestion that it is somehow lack of respect if we don't go with the second preferences that were proposed in the Church's style guide.

The second point I made about our journalistic values is about not taking sides in terms of truth claims. To call the Utah-based faith the "restored gospel of Jesus Christ" or "the restored Church of Jesus Christ," would be confusing. You have to understand that there are several other restoration faiths that claim to be the restored Church of Jesus Christ, and, also, of course, there are many other Christian churches that claim to be the Church of Jesus Christ. We could use the Church of Jesus Christ, but we would have to follow that with parentheses clarifying that it is the Mormons or the Latter-day Saints or some other way to identify which Church of Jesus Christ we're talking about. We use parentheses with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and with the Churches of God in Christ (Pentecostal churches). The Community of Christ, you may know, was once known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. And even though it changed its name in the 90s, we still have to use parentheses to explain to people who the Community of Christ is if we're writing story about it. Aside from the confusion it would create to use the terms, "the restored church of Jesus Christ" or "the church of Jesus Christ," it also ends up being a truth claim, and we can't side with anyone on a truth claim. We have to be neutral about truth claims. That leads me to the third concern: clarity. There are just

too many churches of Christ so we can't side with anyone and we have to be clear on who it is we're talking about. To us it doesn't suggest any lack of respect if we continue to use Mormon as a descriptor.

That leads me to my next point—there is no word to replace Mormonism. There's just no other “ism” word; you can't say Latter-day Saint-ism, really. That just doesn't work for most people and Mormonism is a bigger word than members of the main body of Latter-day Saints. It's a bigger concept, it's a bigger movement, and it includes lots of people, people in the Church, not in the Church, once in the Church, somehow connected to the Church, anybody who believes the faith's text, the Book of Mormon. If that book is something that they also ascribe to, then they fall under the category Mormonism. There just simply isn't another term. We're waiting. If the Church comes up with another term that is widely recognizable, it's clear, and it's inclusive, we'll be happy to use that term. But for now, Mormonism is it. Also in the style guide it said, “when describing the combination of doctrine culture and lifestyle unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the term the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ is accurate and preferred.” I've had lots of emails from believing Latter-day Saints who told me, especially black Mormons, that they took issue with the idea that the culture and lifestyle could be listed under “the restored gospel.” These readers told me “doctrine can go under the category of restored gospel, but culture and tradition, I reject as being part of the gospel,” and they want no part of that.

Adjectives are a problem for journalists too. When you're describing a blogger, a scholar, something like that, we can use Latter-day Saint, but it just isn't quite the same as Mormon. Also, President Nelson suggested that one of the reasons why he wants this to happen is because the full name of the Church includes Jesus Christ, and lots of folks—outsiders—seem not to know that Mormons worship Jesus Christ, so he wants to connect those more closely, but does “Latter-day Saint” do that? Lots of members I've talked to feel really uncomfortable calling themselves Latter-day Saints. Saints are associated more frequently with Catholicism, and a special category of Catholicism. So that makes some members just really wince at the notion of being called saints or even Latter-day Saints.

Where does that leave *The Salt Lake Tribune*? You may know we have a podcast called Mormon Land, and no, we're not changing it. We're open in the future to changing it if ultimately the word Mormon becomes so extinct that no one uses it. We can revisit that, but to us Mormon Land falls in the category of Mormonism, which, as I said, is a bigger concept than the Church or Church members. We've adapted somewhat. If you're a careful reader of my work, which I doubt many of you are, you will see many more uses of the term Latter-day Saint and fewer uses of the word Mormon. We've really tried to do that more. We have almost entirely expunged "LDS Church," which is what President Nelson asked for, and we had long ago stopped, as much as possible, saying Mormon Church, because we know that that's not the name of the Church. Headlines remain a big problem. I don't write headlines and I am really appreciative of those who do. They have wit and their skill goes well beyond mine, but I doubt you will see the full name of the church in a headline anytime soon. It just doesn't fit. It's nine words long, and it's cumbersome. I'm sympathetic to President Nelson's request, but I also know as a journalist how hard it is to maintain those three values of respect, neutrality, and clarity.

As an example of the clarity issue, my actual first name is "Margaret," but I've never used the name Margaret in my life. Even my wedding invitation used "Peggy" because I worried that people wouldn't know who was getting married. So I understand all President Nelson's concerns, but I do think it's going to be very, very difficult going forward to get rid of the term Mormon. I also have received emails and correspondence from people who don't want to lose the connection with the faith's sacred scripture, which is the Book of Mormon, and they don't necessarily see it as pejorative. Many members of the Church themselves have felt really comfortable with that term, and they don't want to see it go away. That's the other thing that I write about, members and how they identify themselves. As long as members continue to see themselves as Mormon and see it is a way to be distinctive from other Christian faiths, I think you'll see that term continue. Language changes and journalism changes, though, and I'm not going to tie my hands totally in the future. I am taking a wait-and-see attitude.