

“Restoration of Truth”

Students share stories, beliefs about Mormon faith

BY BETHANY COURY
Staff Reporter

With one week remaining until the baptism that would seal his conversion into the Mormon Church, sophomore Kevin Lawson received a text message from a friend asking him to pray for her son, a recent Mormon convert. Lawson, taken aback, called his friend to talk about his own spiritual journey, and the conversation about the church's practices, which she deemed questionable, magnified Lawson's pre-existing doubts.

Lawson, a nondenominational Christian, first began attending the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints located on Normal Street January because of a Mormon family he knew since he was a young boy. This family was nice, charitable and the happiest family he had ever met, he said. Lawson said he concluded that if he joined the church, he would become even happier and would find answers to his questions about life. During a Sunday service he attended, people gave testimonies about the church instead of having speakers give specific messages. Dan Doman, one of the two bishops in Kirksville, said that 460 Mormons attend Sunday services and 60 percent come from Kirksville and the other come from the surrounding area.

“People would talk about how giving to the church has made their lives be blessed,” Lawson said. “Or how being a member of the church is a blessing to their lives and given them new insight ... So I figured if I could do that, then I could be blessed in turn.”

Lawson began to meet weekly with the missionaries assigned by the LDS church to the Kirksville region. Lawson said they would give lessons pertaining to what the church was about and everything he should believe. He said many beliefs were hard to swallow, but absolute acceptance is necessary to become a member, so he believed them. His weeks began to center around the church. He attended Sunday services, dinner at a member's house the same night and, eventually, three to five days a week he'd have lessons or other events.

His baptism was set for Feb. 20 and during his preparation about two weeks prior he was asked by the church if he could accept certain principles. Among those principles was the belief that homosexuality is a choice which, when selected, means that person is unable to enter the highest and best heaven.

“God will judge everybody, and it's

not our place to judge and say who's going to end up where,” Lawson said. “And for me that was like the breaking point, because I've got a little cousin, he's nine now, and he's living proof, in my opinion, that God made us how we are. And they try to say that being a homosexual is a choice, and my little cousin's been like this since the day he was born, and ... babies can't choose that kind of stuff.”

Lawson said he tried to ignore the incompatibility of his beliefs with that of the Church, but the conversation with his friend a week later brought his uncertainties to the forefront. He said he stayed up late that night doing research, which led him to find multiple contradictions between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, as well as inconsistencies within the Mormon Church's history. He thought the former ban on the black race from entering priesthood (and consequently the highest heaven), the Church's on-and-off history of polygamy and evidence that challenges the Book of Mormon's archeological references were major discrepancies.

“As I investigated the church, I found out I was, for lack of a better word, brainwashed by them to believe what they believe,” Lawson said. “... They were trying to conform me to a specific model.”

He said it was at this point that he knew he could never follow through with the baptism.

Senior Glessie Reese, who was raised in the Mormon church, has a different impression of the church's motives and methods and thinks following through is worthwhile.

“I feel that [Mormonism] is not inconsistent and that it doesn't really change, and that the things — I feel like we really hold to certain values and certain standards — those things don't really change,” Reese said.

Among these values is the conviction that family is extremely important. Reese said it's so important that Mormons believe the family you have here on earth, such as your parents, spouse and children, is a dynamic that can be continued in a heaven for eternity. Also consistent and central to their faith is a constant effort for perfection — to be more like their example, Jesus Christ.

Although this is not something they can achieve in this life, they believe in eternal progression, Reese said. She said this belief in constant improvement is what motivates their active recruitment, saying to do otherwise would be to stunt a person's growth.

“We're active,” Reese said. “We

have a lot of missionaries out there spreading the LDS faith — or the restored gospel, whatever you want to call it — but that's because we feel like we have this great message, and we want to share ... what made our lives better with other people. I guess some people feel like that's pushy.

“[Mormonism] has completely shaped my life. I feel like it really gives me a lot of hope. It helps me work through problems that we all go through in life. It makes sense to me and makes me feel like there's a greater purpose to being here. ... It gives me a relief from the things that I do wrong. ... I think more than anything it helps me to be a good person and to help others.”

In an effort to follow through with helping others, Reese applied to be a missionary and is waiting for a response from the head of missions for details about her assignment. She could be sent nearly anywhere around the world, including a small town such as Kirksville.

Elder Drake, 19, and Elder Howard, 22, are two such missionaries who were sent to the Kirksville area. As requested, they temporarily replaced their first names with the term “Elder” as they set aside all personal matters, such as their education, and dedicate themselves to their two-year mission. They exemplify the traditional Mormon male: They are on a mission between the ages of 19 and 25, were raised in the Mormon Church and were baptized by the age of 8, before having experienced a personal conversion, all of which they said is customary.

“Usually how it's done is we want children to wait until they're 8 years old — until they're accountable — because you are interviewed for baptism,” Drake said. “You're asked certain questions and asked to live different commandments and basic beliefs of the church, and we want children to be accountable.”

Part of the missionary's job description is keeping people accountable by visiting members of the church who have become less active and encouraging them to be more involved. However, the majority of their time is spent teaching the word to the community.

Elder Drake said that when doing this, missionaries try to approach students, first asking if there's anything they can do to help them out, so people understand that they care about them. Then, he said, they like to promptly follow up with the Book of Mormon and show how it and the



Top : Elder Drake and Elder Howard approach students to spread the word of Mormonism.
Bottom: Sophomore Ryan Lawson was going to convert until he decided he didn't agree with some of their beliefs.

Bible support each other, because people are normally unfamiliar with it, he said.

Elder Howard addressed polygamy, saying that the Bible endorses it, as seen in the righteous example of Abraham. The Book of Mormon condemns polygamy, and their other religious text — the Doctrine and Covenants — has both allowed for and rescinded the practice.

“It seems inconsistent,” Howard said. “[But] we learn that the foolishness of God is wisdom according to man. We can't understand everything that God wants us to do, we just know that, at times, God wants us to be [polygamous].”

Elder Howard gave another example of men's inability to understand

God's plans: the ban on the black race entering priesthood (lifted in 1978), which is not a sign of racism, but rather of divine revelation, Lawson said. The widespread teaching and acceptance of reasoning such as this, when societal factors such as the Civil Rights Movement could seem to play the bigger role, is what made Lawson conclude that Mormonism is a cult. However, Elder Howard takes no offense to this title, saying that a cult is simply a group of people that practice a certain religion.

“[But] with an obsession for a specific person or principle,” Howard said. “And if we are classified as a cult ... I really don't care. Because that's where my devotion is — Jesus Christ.”

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