

# THE EXCLUSION POLICY: ASTERISKED BELONGING

Nathan Kitchen

Having experienced the 2015 exclusion policy as a gay Latter-day Saint father of five and a senior leader in Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families & Friends, I am experiencing the tenth anniversary of “The Policy” as a sober, reflective moment. I witnessed it, I lived it, and I led my fellow LGBTQ peers through it. The 2015 exclusion policy profoundly altered the geography of the institutional church and its society of Saints. It was a trauma that cut into the families of the Church, including mine. Consequently, the Church felt threatening to me for the first time. It was as if strangers had stepped into my spiritual home, preparing to sever me from God, family, and the church I loved. It was also an exhilarating time of purpose as I stood shoulder to shoulder with remarkable queer leaders, shouting affirmations as loudly as we could into the shared space where queerness and Mormonism meet.

The exclusion policy is not an isolated event confined to November 5, 2015. It’s an epic, modern-day Wagnerian Ring Cycle spanning decades, starring the US government, the political machine of the modern church, the LGBTQ civil rights movement, everyday members, and the queer Latter-day Saints with their families. In my memoir, I examine the exclusion policy from an intimate, personal view.<sup>1</sup> In this ten-year retrospective, I will provide a thirty-thousand-foot view of the queer/Latter-day Saint intersection to highlight key scenes, actors, and

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1. Nathan Kitchen, *The Boughs of Love: Navigating the Queer Latter-day Saint Intersection During an Ongoing Restoration* (By Common Consent Press, 2024).

consequences, while offering commentary from the deeply Latter-day Saint, fiercely queer-centric perspective from which I experienced it.

### Before Belonging

The rise of the LGBTQ civil rights movement during the age of Stonewall forced the Church to develop a theology and social policy for sexual minorities.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, brought a newfound visibility, leading to backlash. The Church joined much of society to advance strict anti-gay stances. Confirmed homosexuals faced expulsion from the Church, Church education, and their families. It was a violent and prejudiced era in Church history that left Latter-day Saint sexual minorities shunned and isolated, with only each other for community. In 1977, a group of gay BYU students formed Affirmation following the suicides of two gay students who had undergone church-sanctioned electroshock therapy to “cure” their homosexuality. For decades, the Church continued to ignore Affirmation’s requests for dialogue as LGBTQ Latter-day Saints endured a spiritual ecosystem shaped by danger, silence, and exclusion.

And then Hawaii happened.

On May 5, 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that denying a marriage license to same-sex couples violated Hawaii’s state law. The Church responded swiftly and forcefully. Within two weeks, Boyd K. Packer publicly named the gay-lesbian movement a danger to the Church, and a sweeping, well-funded campaign followed, targeting marriage equality across multiple states.<sup>3</sup> Unwavering, the Church mowed down queer advocates as it barreled toward California Proposition 8 in 2008. There, it would not just confront political adversaries

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2. Neil J. Young, “D. Michael Quinn: The Life and Times of a Mormon Historian,” posted Mar. 29, 2022, by ben25unc, YouTube, [https://youtu.be/WZHP\\_-Iglu4?si=u-TUnyzEXR3IbRoZ&t=1794](https://youtu.be/WZHP_-Iglu4?si=u-TUnyzEXR3IbRoZ&t=1794).

3. Boyd K. Packer, “All-Church Coordinating Council 1993 Boyd K. Packer,” May 18, 1993, Internet Archive, accessed Oct. 7, 2025, [https://archive.org/details/coordinating\\_council\\_1993\\_boyd\\_k\\_packer/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/coordinating_council_1993_boyd_k_packer/mode/2up).

during its most infamous showdown over marriage equality, but also its own members. The latter would prove to be the most devastating for the Church.

By Prop 8, the Church had learned how to effectively mobilize its pews for politicking, asking for Latter-day Saints' hearts, time, and money. The Church's intense efforts created two opportunities for its members: a free education about LGBTQ civil rights and a positive visibility bump for LGBTQ Latter-day Saints. For many members, Prop 8 was a turning point. Wendy Montgomery recalls, "My involvement in actively working to take away the rights of others in 2008 still leaves me filled with shame."<sup>4</sup> Only later would she learn that her teenage son, still closeted, absorbed both his Church's and family's rejection during Prop 8.

The Church's "us versus them" political messaging challenged a large swath of Latter-day Saint families who sheltered their queer children and family members within their eternal family tree. A critical mass of Latter-day Saints realized that the queer children of God are "us." They wanted belonging in the Church for their queer loved ones, and the Church's political campaign became a moral crisis. If the Church wouldn't make space for their LGBTQ loved ones, then they would on a grassroots level.

## The Inclusion Movement

Prop 8 wounded the Church on two fronts: external and internal. Yes, public backlash was fierce, but the more devastating wound came from within: the loss of trust among members sympathetic to LGBTQ Mormons. These rank-and-file members no longer found value in the Church's rejecting language and behavior toward the queer children

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4. Wendy Montgomery, "Mormon Mother Fighting for LGBTQ Inclusion in Her Church," *HuffPost*, Dec. 7, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mormon-mother-fighting-for-lgbtq-inclusion\\_b\\_7345654](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mormon-mother-fighting-for-lgbtq-inclusion_b_7345654).

of God. Both relationships needed to be rehabilitated. The trick was to accomplish this without changing doctrine. On the external front, the Church recalled its public relations operatives back to Salt Lake after Prop 8 and instructed them to collaborate with local LGBTQ community leaders. The relationships built in this process resulted in the 2009 Salt Lake City nondiscrimination ordinance and the 2015 Utah Compromise that protected LGBTQ Utahns from housing and employment discrimination while strengthening the Church's religious exemptions. As remarkable as this "win-win" political success was with LGBTQ activists, the fundamental shift was the Church's evolving internal relationship with its queer members.

For decades, the message to LGBTQ Latter-day Saints was: "You do not belong." Now, the Church sought to change tone—without changing doctrine—by building an ingenious "time-out" zone of belonging that emphasized respect, recognition, understanding, and compassion. Gone were the old confrontational tactics that focused on its queer-exclusionary doctrine; in came language inviting "gay and lesbian Mormons to stay in the church."<sup>5</sup> This new stance permitted members of the Church to love their LGBTQ children and fellow ward members within a narrow scope of tolerance that did not counter the Church's teaching on marriage and family. The star of the show was the Church's new website, [mormonsandgays.org](http://mormonsandgays.org), which showcased video messages from gay Latter-day Saints and pages of encouraging words for the LGBTQ Latter-day Saint community—more encouraging than we had ever heard before—from Church leaders.

Grassroots inclusion efforts suddenly felt Church-sanctioned. This newly constructed post-Prop 8 bubble began filling with LGBTQ Latter-day Saints, their families, and allies, demonstrating that LGBTQ Latter-day Saints did want to belong. It was proof positive that if you

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5. Brady McCombs and Rachel Zoll, "Mormon Church Wants More Compassion for Gays," *Seattle Times*, Dec. 7, 2012, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/mormon-church-wants-more-compassion-for-gays/>.

prepare a place, any place with even a hint of welcome, LGBTQ Latter-day Saints will gather. For the first time in the history of the Church, LGBTQ Latter-day Saints felt wanted because they were hearing that they were wanted. I cannot emphasize enough how novel and exciting this all was. In the very spirit of Mormonism, it inspired many to be anxiously engaged and do many things within this space of their own free will.

- **Affirmation created a welcoming space accommodating conflicting, messy identities without judgment or prescription, providing support and nuance for the diverse queer journey.** President Randall Thacker articulated a new vision: “We are building a community where we don’t have to choose between being Mormon or gay. We can be fully affirmed as both.”<sup>6</sup> After years of ignoring Affirmation, the Church began collaborating with it on strategy and messaging. Affirmation increased the Church’s queer awareness quotient by regularly bringing in queer Latter-day Saints from around the world to meet with Public Affairs at headquarters.
- **Mormons Building Bridges (MBB) was organized, increasing the visibility and organization of allies within the Church.** Notably, it captivated public attention in 2012 when three hundred of its Latter-day Saint allies, dressed in their Sunday best, marched in the Utah Pride Parade. MBB circulated a “gay-friendly” ward list and launched “Sit with Me Sunday,” pairing LGBTQ Latter-day Saints with welcoming allies for Sunday services.
- **Same-sex couples began coming to church, publicly discussing their attendance and welcome.** Couples, such as Berta Marquez and Jim Carlston, and John and Goran Gustav-Wrathall, spoke openly about the belonging and community they felt in their congregations.
- **Evergreen International closed, and North Star absorbed Evergreen’s email list.** Evergreen, with its heavy promotion of conversion therapy, lost the Church’s support and financing, causing it to collapse in 2014. Under Ty Mansfield, North Star increased the visibility of queer Latter-day Saints living Church teachings through its Voices of Hope project.

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6. Randall Thacker, “Happy New Year Affirmation Friends!,” Affirmation (website), Jan. 9, 2013, <https://affirmation.org/happy-new-year-affirmation-friends/>.

- **Latter-day Saint mixed-orientation couples began to feel comfortable being visible in the Church.** Laura Skaggs and her husband became public figures in this space, with Laura delivering an electrifying address at the September 2015 Affirmation conference about her experiences. In addition, Josh and Lolly Weed gained worldwide attention when Josh announced in a 2012 blog post that he was gay.
- **Mama Dragons was founded in 2013.** What began as an online chat thread grew into a robust network of Mormon mothers fiercely protecting their queer children. “Family” now had a community in the Church, thanks to this army of mothers who unconditionally loved and advocated for queer Latter-day Saints.
- **Allies could now publicly minister to the queer Latter-day Saint population without fear of losing their temple recommend or Church membership.** LDS families like Bryce and Sarah Cook and Tom and Wendy Montgomery felt empowered to hold space for their queer children in the complex relationship with the Church and its doctrine of forever families.

Laura Skaggs, an Affirmation board member during the exclusion policy, calls this period “The Integration Movement.”<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, Mitt Romney’s presidential campaigns shoved the Church into the national spotlight, creating a “Mormon Moment.” Keen to rehabilitate its post-Prop 8 image amid such publicity, the Church needed its bubble of belonging just as much as its LGBTQ members did. I joined Affirmation at the crest of the Integration Movement. Its exciting optimism was infectious and on full display at Affirmation’s September 2015 conference in Provo. There, I felt part of something special. I was surrounded by a host of allies and connected with LGBTQ Mormons from around the world. I listened to Affirmation leaders deliver powerful and confident talks optimistically and unashamedly knitting LGBTQ Latter-day Saints into the fabric of the Restoration. The Church

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7. I would like to acknowledge and thank Laura Skaggs for collaborating with me to outline the activities and organizations in the Integration Movement.

appeared to be tolerating the work that was going on in its post-Prop 8 bubble of belonging.

What a difference forty-six days would make.

### Calling Exclusion “Belonging”

On November 5, 2015, I came across a story on Facebook about a Church handbook change. Soon, my curiosity turned into crushing disbelief. Legally married same-sex Latter-day Saints were now branded apostates, and their children were denied the Church’s saving ordinances. Why would the Church do this to children—to my children? Much has been written about why this exclusion policy was an affront to Christian teachings and Latter-day Saint theology.<sup>8</sup> However, at that moment, what was most striking about the policy was the feeling of betrayal it engendered.

The optimism of the Integration Movement presupposed that LGBTQ people, their families, and allies were collaborative partners with the Church over what constituted belonging. For many, the Church’s change in tone instilled a hope that real change was imminent. In hindsight, none of the Church’s teachings or doctrines had changed one whit since the Prop 8 days. The Church continued its vigorous state-to-state fight to oppose same-sex marriage, culminating in its amicus brief in *Obergefell* that quoted the entire family proclamation. When the Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality in June 2015, some thought the Church might adapt. Instead, the exclusion policy emerged, shattering the thriving grassroots movement that was burgeoning within the post-Prop 8 bubble.

The exclusion policy was a harsh wake-up call to the realities of the maxim “Their space, their rules,” for at its core, the policy was a

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8. Grant Hardy, “Rifts in the Mormon Family: What Just Happened?,” University of Chicago Divinity School, Nov. 19, 2019, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/rifts-mormon-family-what-just-happened>.

display of power over the lives and eternities of the Church's sexual minorities and their children. For many new to the bubble, it was a devastating moment where hope evaporated in the face of a betrayal of an assumed good-faith collaboration. For many of our queer elders who had survived the pre-belonging era, it came as no surprise. They had long warned that the post-Prop 8 bubble was temporary. Their caution had gone unheeded in a cloud of optimism.

Astoundingly, the Church continued to heavily evangelize for LGBTQ belonging, as if the exclusion policy had never happened. It refreshed its website, offered new videos of faithful gay and lesbian spokespeople, and renamed the URL from *mormonsandgays.org* to *mormonandgay.org*.

Mormon and gay.

This was the ultimate messaging takeover, a colonization of Affirmation's message during the Integration Movement: "You can be Mormon and gay." This time around, the Church began policing what was happening in its bubble of belonging, forcefully asserting its right to be the sole arbiter of belonging according to its definition of what made an acceptable queer in the kingdom. The result was social shunning, membership restrictions, and even excommunication—all spiritual traumas that introduced fear into the once-hopeful bubble.

### Trauma, Spiritual Refugees, and Community Response

The trauma of the exclusion policy effectively ended the Integration Movement—not overnight, but gradually, as reality set in. Mormons Building Bridges discontinued "Sit with Me Sunday" and its "gay friendly" ward list. Its messaging shifted from integration to robust engagement over the morality of the Church's treatment of LGBTQ people. Affirmation made a slow pivot from "you can be Mormon and gay" to a "healing trauma and preventing suicide" platform. It organized Fathers in Affirmation and Mothers in Affirmation to support hundreds of queer parents and their children. Mama Dragons eventually

exited the exclusive Mormon space and expanded nationally, appealing to all faiths.

Before the implementation of the exclusion policy, LGBTQ Mormon support organizations were primarily online, emerging to host face-to-face events such as Pride parades and Affirmation and North Star conferences. The virtual peer and ally communities of the Integration Movement were the primary support sources for LGBTQ Mormons when the exclusion policy appeared. Peer and ally communities can only go so far in trauma support. In response, the therapeutic community met the need, with licensed therapists and organizations such as Encircle and Flourish Therapy emerging within this space to provide affirming, evidence-based, and culturally competent mental health services for queer Latter-day Saints and their families. This symbiosis between peer support and therapeutic support was evidence of a maturing community response in contrast to the days when Evergreen kept therapy in-house, often using non-evidence-based conversion therapy with LGBTQ Mormons.

On its face, the exclusion policy may have appeared as rules to manage Latter-day Saint sexual minorities who strayed into marriage equality, but its reach went much further. The policy was a reminder to all queer Latter-day Saints that the Church was not afraid to enforce queer exclusion in the plan of salvation—even if it meant coming after the children—as it reached into the great houses of Zion to rearrange and sever family relationships on an eternal scale. The result was spiritual trauma, making many LGBTQ Mormons refugees from Zion, as the exclusion policy drove them from their spiritual home. This phenomenon rattled me the most. As a senior leader in Affirmation, I witnessed the death of testimony all around me. Affirmation had become a critical gathering place and a way station for LGBTQ Latter-day Saints, sitting with spiritual refugees as they made incredibly difficult decisions about where they wanted to be that felt safe and healthy for them in this new exclusion policy world.

## Community Censorship

Before Prop 8, no dialogue channel existed between the Church and its queer population. The Integration Movement, launched during a period of public image rehabilitation, opened cautious lines of communication. In 2013, the Church signaled that it was amenable to dialogue with Affirmation, provided it tempered any public messaging that might embarrass the Church. This seemed a reasonable ask. After all, those were the rules our LGBTQ activist peers followed to find common ground and achieve remarkable work through compromise in the civil rights arena. This seemed a moment of synodality, where the Church and its queer population come together to “speak openly and as equals about issues that would have been [previously] barred from discussion.”<sup>9</sup> For two years, these relationship-building efforts were remarkable in that they were even happening at all. However, the 2015 exclusion policy uncovered a critical difference between LGBTQ Latter-day Saints and LGBTQ activists. LGBTQ Latter-day Saints do not exist on common ground; they exist on church ground. There are no compromises on church ground. Discussions do not happen as equals. No amount of dialogue and relationship building had protected the LGBTQ Latter-day Saints from harm in their spiritual home, nor would it in the future.

Some support groups for LGBTQ Mormons hoped that dialogue might still lead to progress. In January 2016, Affirmation’s executive committee noted that “even if the policy doesn’t go away, in the long run it won’t matter if it means that we have enhanced opportunities to engage with the Church and foster an enhanced dialogue.”<sup>10</sup> This notion seemed to disregard that the privilege of dialogue with the

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9. David Gibson, “The New Pope Might Be Somewhat Like the Old Pope,” *New York Times*, Opinion Guest Essay, May 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/08/opinion/conclave-pope-leo-xiv-catholic-church.html>.

10. Affirmation, “2016 Strategic Planning PowerPoint,” Jan. 15, 2016. Copy in author’s possession.

Church came with a price: censorship of the queer voice.<sup>11</sup> By 2018, Affirmation leaders began considering the high cost of dialogue with the Church in the new exclusion policy landscape. Were we sacrificing queer people for the chance of rapprochement with the Church?

With this concern in focus, Affirmation pivoted to trauma-aware messaging, acknowledging that for healthy collaboration to occur, two parties must be able to freely speak out about what is hurting them. However, this concept of open, honest, trauma-aware organizational communication met resistance within a faction of Affirmation's leadership, as well as in other spaces within the LGBTQ/Latter-day Saint intersection. This conflict illustrates that the exclusion policy had been highly effective at splitting the queer Latter-day Saint community into binaries: queer people judging one another as faithful or unfaithful, respectful or disrespectful, testimony-filled or anti-Mormon, according to how we framed our experiences under the exclusion policy. No one could openly discuss the realities of the queer experience in the Church under the exclusion policy without everyone retreating to team "Church" or team "Queer." Horrifyingly, an unexpected reality of the Church's exclusion policy was that *we* were excluding one another.

When the Church unexpectedly rescinded the exclusion policy in 2019, I had just begun my Affirmation presidency. Trauma care, including suicide prevention, may have been the name of the game during the exclusion policy, but the rescission marked what was urgently needed next for queer Latter-day Saints: trauma processing. If leaders did not

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11. What does it look like when a marginalized community censors itself? It is hiding and discounting of the grief of others, no public venting. It is calling those harmed by the Church "angry" and "bitter" when they dare speak up about what is hurting them. It is toxic positivity, virtue signaling, and assigning blame to spiritual refugees who leave. It is telling queer people to wait quietly because change is just around the corner. It is vetting all public statements to be as trauma-free as possible for the Church to hear. It is feigning persecution when you are called out for censoring others. It is creating and naming villains in the LGBTQ Latter-day Saint community from which to differentiate yourself as a "safe" LGBTQ person or organization.

facilitate this critical step, we would hamper both community and personal healing—and, ultimately, queer joy. Trauma processing is not a permanent state, but it is a necessary waypoint on the path to recovery. It involves candidly acknowledging trauma, grieving losses, and openly discussing our experiences—all done within a safe, affirming, and supportive community. I did not see the argument for community censorship in the queer/Latter-day Saint intersection as compatible with healthy trauma processing. Regardless of its recension, the exclusion policy happened, and I would not be party to maintaining a status quo that failed to acknowledge the harm it caused. It was time to change the conversation. It was time to hear from everyone, amplify all queer experiences, and celebrate the fact that queer people are reliable reporters of their own experiences. I opened Affirmation’s communication platforms to LGBTQ Latter-day Saints for their authentic experiences under the exclusion policy, declaring, “We do not want to hide your story. Name your hurts, call out those who have harmed you, tell of your triumphs, and speak to your queer joy, but whatever you do, don’t suppress your experiences. Assign meaning to them, record them, and publish this authenticity to the world.”<sup>12</sup>

### Recension, Rebranding, and Residual Harm

What if you, as an organization, could have a do-over of the November 2015 exclusion policy, a chance to learn from your mistakes and recraft it in a manner that achieves the same outcome but doesn’t negate your members’ experiences with their LGBTQ loved ones, or diverge from a shared understanding of Christ’s love toward the marginalized? Is it possible to hide the ugliness of the exclusion policy in plain sight? This is what happened when President Oaks publicly announced in

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12. “Stories and Reactions to Reversal of the November 2015 Policy on Gay Families—Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families & Friends,” Affirmation, Feb. 28, 2022, <https://affirmation.org/tag/nov-15-policy-gay-families-reversal/>.

April 2019, that “effective immediately, children of parents who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender may be baptized without First Presidency approval. . . . Previously, our handbook characterized same-gender marriage by a member as apostasy. While we still consider such a marriage to be a serious transgression, it will not be treated as apostasy for purposes of Church discipline.”<sup>13</sup> This recension was not the end of the exclusion policy. It was its fragmentation—scattered in footnotes and handbook entries, hidden in plain sight. Sadly, the entire experience afforded the Church some valuable lessons about how to exclude better, using them in the implementation of its controversial 2024 transgender exclusion policy. The Church has mastered asterisked belonging, justifying it as being given in love.

Where do we go from here in the queer Mormon community? The path forward is not through the old rules of the post-Prop 8 bubble.

### Queer Spirituality Is a Right

Spirituality looks different for every queer person because we are navigating as best we can a plan of salvation not built for us. As a queer community with shared Mormon heritage, we have no right to judge, exclude, or censor other queer Mormons over what safety, healing, or faith looks like for them. It is unconscionable to mirror the exclusion we have suffered through Church policy by gatekeeping the faith journeys of other queer people. Every queer soul has the right to speak up about their experiences and choose the places that feel safe and healthy for them. Belonging comes from connection, not exclusion. We can claim belonging in multiple supportive communities. Queer people, like all people, exist on a spiritual spectrum. If we cannot extend the courtesy to our queer peers to tell their stories, name their joys and

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13. Dallin H. Oaks, “Details Shared by President Oaks,” in “First Presidency Shares Messages from General Conference Leadership Session,” Church Newsroom, Apr. 4, 2019, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/first-presidency-messages-general-conference-leadership-session-april-2019>.

harms, to evolve, to doubt, to believe, or to leave, then what in the world have our queer elders been fighting for since Stonewall?

Since the exclusion policy, queer people have increasingly had to make choices about their spirituality in the face of doctrine hostile to queer exaltation. And they have done this with greater visibility and boldness. When Church members ask, “Why isn’t the Church enough?” they miss the point. This question overlooks the glaring absence of healthy, supportive spaces within the Church. It also assigns blame in the wrong direction: to the refugee instead of to those who’ve made the church unsafe. If your pews are empty of queer people, the question isn’t why they’ve left—it’s what pushed them out. As Elder Patrick Kearon reminds us about displaced people, “This moment does not define the refugees, but our response will help define us.”<sup>14</sup> The same is true here: Queer Latter-day Saints are not defined by their departure, but our faith community will be defined by how it responds.

### A New Integration Movement

I once lamented to Michael Soto that in the division we create among ourselves in the queer/Latter-day Saint intersection, we tend to eat our own. Michael is a queer Latter-day Saint and president of Equality Arizona with experience negotiating LGBTQ civil rights initiatives with the Church. He reminded me that one of the last pieces of work any marginalized community undertakes before reaching maturity is to build intergenerational connections. His observation struck me. We don’t achieve community stability until the queer elders, those working on the “front lines,” and the newly out are knit together. We are not there yet in the queer Mormon community. The trauma of the exclusion policy fractured us. And regrettably, we practiced lateral violence

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14. Patrick Kearon, “Refuge from the Storm,” *Ensign*, May 2016, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2016/04/refuge-from-the-storm?lang=eng>.

toward one another in the LGBTQ Mormon community,<sup>15</sup> a trauma response to the negative messages that we absorbed from the exclusion policy. Our unkind words, rejecting actions, and exclusionary practices have fostered enmity rather than connection between the generations. This form of harm is deeply painful because it comes from within the very community that is supposed to offer acceptance and support.

It is time to stop the lateral violence and, in the aftermath of the exclusion policy, spark a queer-centered integration movement. Our dialogue and relationship building with one another is much more life-saving and life-giving than with any organization, including the institutional church. We cannot afford to let institutional exclusion divide us. The “walled gardens” of insular communities may have helped us survive in crisis, but now they must open. Tear down our queer Rameumptoms. Realize that we are a community of both mentors *and* peers. Respect our elders and give grace to those falling out of the closet. What kind of community are we if we don’t have one another?

In the wake of the exclusion policy, the landscape just outside the closet door has become crowded with new organizations jockeying to welcome our LGBTQ Latter-day Saint peers out. Our position at the closet door is a privilege, not a competition. Respect the right of queer individuals to meet their own needs and to organize accordingly. Mature organizations demonstrate wisdom by encouraging LGBTQ people and allies to serve the community. New groups show humility when recognizing and including existing organizations in their efforts. Intergenerational work occurs when we show one another mutual respect, extend grace, and foster meaningful relationships. Our messy LGBTQ Mormon community exists for a reason. It comes from a shared heritage, a shared struggle, and a shared longing for queer joy.

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15. Duy Tran, Corrinne T. Sullivan, and Lucy Nicholas, “Lateral Violence and Microaggressions in the LGBTQ+ Community: A Scoping Review,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 70, no. 7 (2022): 1310–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.2020543>.

We don't have to always agree, but when "difference becomes a dividing line, it's worth asking whether discomfort has started to harden into exclusion."<sup>16</sup>

### Build Queer-Led, Inclusive Communities

Research shows that our relationships with others contribute to increased happiness.<sup>17</sup> Being part of a supportive community is the most potent predictor of increased health and lifespan.<sup>18</sup> It is life-threatening when an LGBTQ person is pushed to the margins—or worse, pushed entirely out of their spiritual home, family, schools, workplaces, or even the heavens. We cannot leave the life-saving work of community building to others, not even to our allies. It's our responsibility. Alma taught at the Waters of Mormon that we cannot surrender belonging to politics or prejudice.

Shortly after becoming Affirmation's president in 2019, I met with Greg Prince, who was launching his book *Gay Rights and the Mormon Church*. I shared my hope to find a way to continue dialogue with Church leaders. Greg cut straight to the point: "Don't focus on the men in the red chairs. Lobbying the brethren is a waste of time."<sup>19</sup> His advice was clear: build visible, joyful communities that thrive—regardless of institutional approval.

16. Jake Myers, "I'm a Gay Man Who Resents Being Part of the 'LGBTQ+' Umbrella. Does That Make Me a Horrible Person?" *Queerty*, May 6, 2025, <https://www.queerty.com/im-a-gay-man-who-resents-being-part-of-the-the-lgbtq-umbrella-does-that-make-me-a-horrible-person-20250509/>.

17. Susan Dominus, "How Nearly a Century of Happiness Research Led to One Big Finding," *New York Times Magazine*, May 1, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/01/magazine/happiness-research-studies-relationships.html>.

18. Julianne Holt-Lunstad, Timothy B. Smith, Mark Baker, Tyler Harris, and David Stephenson, "Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 10, no. 2 (2015): 227–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691614568352>.

19. Nathan Kitchen, "A Recension," in *Boughs of Love*, 171

I pondered Greg’s advice as I began to clarify how to lead an organization in an era of exclusion. A month later, the Church rescinded the 2015 exclusion policy. In an interview with the *Daily Beast*, I was asked, “What’s next for LGBTQ Mormons?” I acknowledged that this event had changed us as a community. And in this change, we would move forward, stronger, more resilient, and more self-aware. This was a time to be proud of what we had endured and to recognize that we could personally move forward, regardless of the Church’s policies. I wasn’t pinning my hopes on policy change or church LGBTQ reforms, but instead on the community of LGBTQ Mormons I wanted to keep building. “Meanwhile, I’m going to be me,” I said. “I’m going to draw my friends, my family, and my community into my circle of love. That’s where I focus.”<sup>20</sup>

That focus is the greatest lesson the exclusion policy taught me. Respect, recognition, understanding, and compassion—even if smiles and tears accompany them—are not belonging. *Belonging is belonging*. We do not belong to prejudice. We belong to each other. And in that belonging, we are a life-saving, life-sustaining community—affirming every queer soul’s inherent self-worth, and supporting their sacred journey toward faith, healing, and joy.

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20. Samantha Allen, “The LGBT Mormons Pushing the Church to Accept Equality,” *Daily Beast*, Apr. 13, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-lgbt-mormons-pushing-the-church-to-accept-equality>.

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