

A CLOSE-UP VIEW OF FAITH CRISIS

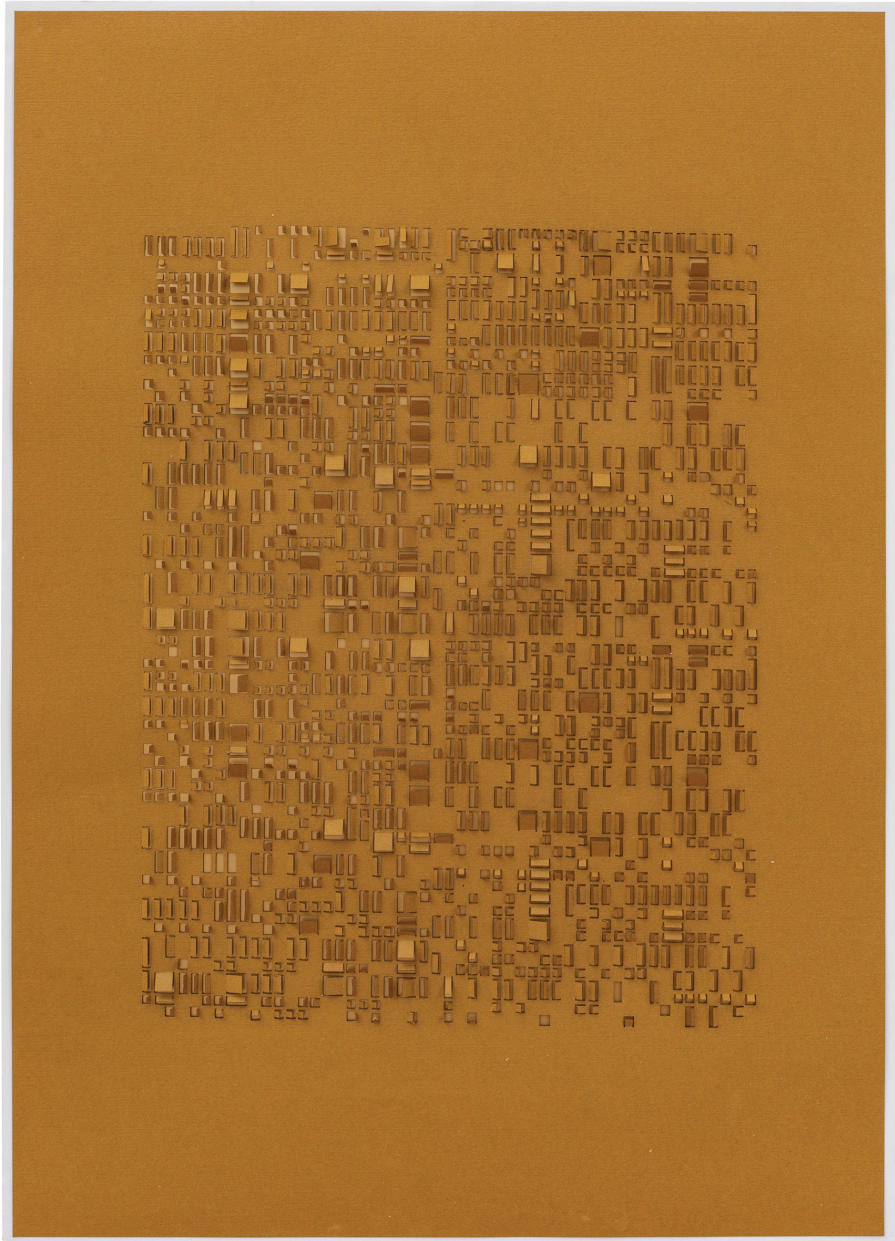
Gregory A. Prince

Faith crisis is pervasive within religious traditions of all flavors. Unresolved, it can lead to departure from one's own tradition or failure to engage in the first place. I have found it useful to frame faith crisis in the context of three "cards" that organized religion can "play": truth claims, moral authority, and community. If any card that was working ceases to work, a crisis can occur that can result in permanent disaffiliation. This essay focuses on the truth claims card.

Preamble to Faith Crisis

From its earliest days to the present time, Church leaders and members have written countless minute books, journals, diaries, letters, and other documents. While a blessing to the historian, such a record can be a challenge to Church members. When the carefully curated official narrative, laden with historical truth claims, is called into question by the Church's own documents, a faith crisis can follow.

Nineteenth-century publications on Mormonism, whether sympathetic or antagonistic, were mostly polemical, with many attempting to disprove the religion's truth claims. By the mid-twentieth century, some books on Mormon history began to lay claim to greater objectivity founded on careful documentation. Three that stood out were Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My History* (1945), Juanita Brooks's *Mountain Meadows Massacre* (1950), and Leonard Arrington's *Great Basin Kingdom* (1958). But even as these books signaled a quiet revolution in Mormon historiography, an institutional counterrevolution was gaining momentum. Led initially by apostle Joseph Fielding Smith, it sought to preserve a glossy narrative of the Church's history, with



Gonzalo Silva, *Wandering Breath*, 2025, CD drive,
giclée print, resin 3D print, 11¾ x 5¾ x 1¾ in.

particular attention to a burnished Joseph Smith and no mention of his embrace of polygamy.

The New Mormon History

1965 was a banner year for Mormon intellectuals. Leonard Arrington, a professor of economic history at Utah State University, led the organization of the Mormon History Association and became its first president; and a group of graduate students at Stanford University started a new scholarly publication, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, the first independent journal devoted to Mormon studies. Apostles Ezra Taft Benson, Mark E. Petersen, and Boyd K. Packer were particularly threatened by *Dialogue*, even though nearly all its editorial staff were devout Latter-day Saints. In a meeting in the late 1960s of the Church Educational System board of trustees, whose membership included church president David O. McKay, Benson said, "That book, *Dialogue*, has no value in the world. In fact, if I had my way, I would *burn* the book." McKay replied, "Brethren, in this Church we do not burn books. But if we did, we ought to burn some that have been written around this table!"¹

In 1972, Leonard Arrington was called to be Church Historian, the only time in the Church's history that its official historian had professional credentials in the field. Such a calling required a unanimous vote among the Quorum of the Twelve, and Benson, Petersen, and Packer were all in the Twelve at that time. Although the minutes of the meeting in which the vote was taken are not accessible, it is likely it was an "omnibus" proposal covering an overall restructuring of the Church bureaucracy. All three subsequently turned against Arrington and his History Division, eventually succeeding in dismantling the division and releasing Arrington from his position in 1982.

1. Paul H. Dunn, interviewed February 18, 1995.

Early Signs of Trouble

Largely because of tutoring from Lester Bush and Tony Hutchinson, and earlier role modeling from Juanita Brooks, I found the New Mormon History to be a breath of fresh air, not a threat. But to others who had no preconditioning, it often was devastating.

My first exposure to the devastation came shortly after I was called to be a counselor to the bishop of a newly formed LDS singles ward in 1981. In January 1982, the other counselor to the bishop, an undergraduate student at Georgetown University, asked if he could speak with me about some issues of concern to him.² I did my best to talk him through his questions, and for a while he seemed satisfied. Ultimately, however, he walked away from the Church, as did many other members of that congregation.

The following year, I wrote in a diary entry, “More and more of our peers (and even some older friends) are undergoing similar crises. I believe, furthermore, that we are seeing merely the tip of an emerging iceberg. I foresee that many will abandon the church, and that the Church, itself, will be shaken as the confrontation between fundamentalism and intellectuality widens.”³ I spent hundreds of hours over several years talking people—including members of my own family—off the ledge, but many left despite my efforts. Once they concluded their church had lied to them, either overtly or by withholding information, there was little anyone could do to keep them in.

A Declaration of Theological War

Emboldened by their success in dismantling Leonard Arrington’s franchise, the three apostles took aim at other intellectuals. In 1983 and

2. Gregory A. Prince diary, January 10, 1982. Hereafter listed as GAP diary.

3. GAP diary, Aug. 26, 1983.

1993, in both instances taking advantage of a power vacuum caused by ailing Church presidents who were incapable of intervening, they took high-profile action against a few key intellectuals (excommunicating five in 1993) and thereby sent a shock wave throughout the entire Mormon intellectual community, whose harmful ripples continue to be felt to this day. As top leaders in a highly centralized church, they held all the cards that then existed. But they did not hold one that had not yet been invented, and it changed the game. Permanently.

The Internet

The internet began as an initiative by the Department of Defense in the 1960s. I remember in the 1970s and 1980s the workings of the “Mormon underground,” an informal network of scholars and history buffs that served to disseminate photocopies of previously unavailable documents. The enabling technology was the photocopying machine, and the conduits were the US Postal Service and discreet personal couriers. All of that changed with the internet. Suddenly, digitized images could be shared around the world in seconds. Documents became available from countless sources, even the Church archives. As the documents were read and digested, online discussion groups and blogs proliferated. The internet democratized data, and social media disseminated them. A Church hierarchy that had controlled the message largely by controlling the data now lost control of both.

We Don't Have a Solution

At the Mormon History Association meeting in 2008, while I was serving on the board of directors of *Dialogue*, several fellow board members and I spoke with Marlin Jensen, who was a General Authority Seventy and Church Historian. He acknowledged that the Church was having the same problem as other religious traditions in trying to keep the youth engaged and said that for Mormonism much of the problem

resided in the dissemination of historical information on the internet that went contrary to what they had been taught.⁴

Unlike most of his colleagues, Jensen both acknowledged the problem and struggled to find a solution. “I don’t think a week passes—I’ve got a note in my pocket now that somebody addressed to me, about talking to one of their sons who has lost his faith after his mission, after his marriage. There are new websites where there are questions that there aren’t answers for.” He didn’t suggest a response to those questions, but it later became clear he was thinking about it.

While I did not spend much time monitoring internet chatter, it was clear many Church members were becoming aware of questions that had been there for many years, but to which they had been oblivious because nowhere in their church experience had there been a venue for discussing them. I did my best to walk them through the virtual minefield to a safe spot on the other side, but often the problem was much deeper: “My church does not trust me with the truth.” When they reached that point, they were unlikely to remain engaged.

At the 2010 meeting of the Mormon History Association, I spent an hour with Marlin Jensen, continuing the discussion we had begun two years earlier.⁵ The problem of inconvenient history had continued to grow, and he was now willing to drill down with me. He said apostle Neal Maxwell, who had died in 2004, had told his colleagues they needed to prepare a response to Joseph Smith’s involvement in polygamy “because we’re going to have to confront it someday.” Marlin added, “But we didn’t do it, and he was right.” Finally, recognizing the increasing number of Church members bothered by historical issues, they were poised to do it.

Jensen said he had received approval to begin preparing papers on the Book of Abraham, DNA and the Book of Mormon, polygamy, same-sex marriage, race and priesthood, and women and priesthood.

4. GAP diary, May 23–24, 2008.

5. GAP diary, May 29, 2010.

He articulated what I had already come to understand: “If we don’t inoculate them, then when they find out about these things eventually, they are gone.”

The Swedish Rescue Mission

Six months after the MHA meeting, Jensen and Rick Turley, an assistant church historian, were deployed to Stockholm, Sweden to address a growing crisis among Church members who were struggling with the same historical issues that we had been discussing. What caught the attention of Church officers was both the number of strugglers—nearly 10 percent of the members belonged to a Mormon Stories Facebook group that openly discussed the historical problems—and the fact that they included several local Church leaders, the most prominent being Hans Mattsson, a third-generation Swedish Mormon who had served as the Area Authority. The meeting did not go well.

Travis Stratford

I met Travis Stratford in March 2011, when I spoke at a Mormon Stories conference he hosted in his Manhattan office. One of the speakers was an employee of Bonneville International, the media conglomerate owned by the Church. He said he had been working with the Church to try to determine the causes of inactivity among all members—he put the worldwide inactivity rate at 82 percent—and lack of retention of converts. None of the causes they had identified surprised me because they were what Marlin Jensen and I had discussed the prior year. Neither was I surprised to hear him say that any proposed substantive change would encounter two obstacles: Thomas Monson, the Church president, was nostalgic and disliked any kind of change; and Boyd Packer, president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, still clung to the belief that hiding the truth was the best way to run the Church.⁶

6. GAP diary, March 26, 2011.

Several weeks after the conference, Stratford, who had served a proselytizing mission to Sweden, sent me an email that introduced me to Hans Mattsson:

I asked him what the Brethren had to say about his crisis of faith. He was very candid—and discouraged. He talked about how—last November—he was able to get Elder [Marlin] Jensen, Brother [Rick] Turley, and the local Area Authority to come to Stockholm to meet about 50 “members with questions” who were personally invited to the event by Hans. It was a three-hour meeting where these members could ask any question they wanted. The usual questions came up, and apparently the answers were not satisfying. . . .

One of the authorities (not sure who) said, “It is time for you now to tip the scale either to the church and to the Spirit of Christ or in a different direction and to the spirit of the devil. Make up your minds.” Ouch!

Hans says that after the meeting, all of the “questioning” attendees were called in by their bishops and stake presidents. He says the majority ultimately left the church on their own or were brought in front of a disciplinary council for apostasy.”⁷

As Stratford continued the online correspondence, Mattsson opened up about his own story. Born into one of the foundational, multi-generational Mormon families in Sweden, he checked all the boxes as he grew up, including serving a proselytizing mission in England. He gradually rose through the local ranks to become the Area Authority.

His years in that position (2000–2005) coincided with the blossoming of the internet, and as he traveled throughout northern Europe on Church assignments, he encountered for the first time the historical questions that were tipping over members. “At one of these, I was presented with issues that some members asked their stake president about. The topics ranged from Church history to the priesthood. These were questions that they [the European stake presidents] could not answer.”⁸

7. GAP diary, May 5, 2011.

8. GAP diary, May 24, 2011.

Neither could an apostle to whom Mattsson took the questions. To make his situation worse, he was instructed not to talk to Church members or even his own children about his own doubts and questions. Church members, some in his extended family, branded him an apostate and a threat to the Church.

Now that he had a sympathetic ear in Stratford, Mattsson was open to further discussions.

The LDS Faith Crisis Survey

In August 2011, I heard again from Stratford. He had asked Marlin Jensen and Mattsson if they would come to Manhattan to try to answer Mattsson's questions. Both agreed to meet in late October. Stratford asked that I complete the foursome that would include himself.⁹

Stratford then worked with John Dehlin, pioneer of the Mormon podcast genre, to craft a survey that would put numbers on the problem. Dehlin took the lead in deploying a social media-based survey of people who either had left the Church over historical or doctrinal issues or were marginalized and in danger of leaving. Within twenty-four hours they received more than 2,000 completed surveys. Upon reaching 3,000, they ended the survey and began to digest the data.

Just before I boarded a cross-country flight (I was in Utah) to attend the meeting in Manhattan, Stratford emailed me a three-hundred-page distillation of the survey that put a face on the numbers. I could not read the accounts without feeling pain, sorrow, and frustration because of a problem that could have been addressed decades earlier but instead was swept under the rug. Here are some:

A family member drowned on a river in northern Mexico. This person's father, a member of the Quorum of the 70, gave this person a priesthood blessing, and in the name of Jesus Christ, commanded him to raise and come back to life. Nothing happened. It was then that I knew that the priesthood authority was false and the church wasn't true. I went online

9. GAP diary, Aug. 2, 2011.

for answers and discovered all of the secrets, Book of Abraham, temple changes, etc., and my testimony was dashed in 30 minutes.

I just did due diligence on the First Vision versions and all info regarding this and Joseph's history . . . it broke my heart . . . after 40 years [of] solid belief.

I was fine with the church teaching that they believed that homosexual activity is a sin, but when they DECLARED WAR on my gay son by bankrolling Prop 8 and then telling outright lies during and after the campaign, the Lord assured me that this church was no longer for me. I simply cannot support a church that does not have love as its central tenet.

The church's priorities in my lifetime just become very warped. At a time when hundreds of thousands die of malaria every year, God is primarily concerned with the number of piercings a woman has? Or whether gay people are getting married? Or whether Nordstrom's has a nice enough home in SLC?

I arrived in New York on a Saturday.¹⁰ Mattsson and I stayed at Stratford's home, and the three of us talked through his questions until midnight. We continued our discussion Sunday morning for another five hours, by which time he was off the ledge. That meant our Monday meeting with Jensen could focus exclusively on the faith crisis survey.

The survey revealed plenty of surprises:

- 39 percent of the respondents were in their 30s; 81 percent were in their 20s through 40s.
- Half the male respondents had served in an elders quorum presidency; one-third of the female respondents had served in a Relief Society presidency.
- 70 percent were married.
- 69 percent had college degrees: 38 percent bachelor's, 21 percent master's, 10 percent doctorate.
- 60 percent had annual incomes over \$60,000.

In other words, this sample of some three thousand people was not of wild-eyed fringe elements. Neither was it representative of the

10. GAP diary, Oct. 22, 2011.

average Mormon. Instead, it reflected the higher end of the scale, both in education and income. Precisely the demographics the Church could least afford to lose.

While the demographics were surprising to me, the topics that were tipping people over were not:

- The Book of Mormon
- Polygamy, particularly Joseph Smith's practice of polyandry
- The Book of Abraham
- Black members and the priesthood
- Masonic influences in the temple ceremony
- Conflicting versions of the First Vision
- Past Church positions on science, including age of the earth and evolution
- Women and priesthood
- Authenticity of priesthood restoration
- Changes in the temple ceremony¹¹

The Meeting in Manhattan

We met for three hours in Manhattan. Jensen knew the historical topics that were troubling people, but not the demographics. He seemed particularly focused on the fact that so many who had left were not just leadership material but *had been leaders*. He made two interesting comments that supported our data. The first was that a man converted to Mormonism in Latin America had a one in twenty chance of remaining active long enough to be ordained an elder. The second was that attrition of returned missionaries was so alarming that mission presidents were being asked to create Facebook pages to include all the missionaries in their missions, and then to keep track of them indefinitely.¹²

Jensen asked Stratford if he would be willing to withhold publication of the data until he could arrange a meeting in Salt Lake City with his colleagues, where Stratford could make the same presentation. He agreed.

11. GAP diary, Oct. 23, 2011.

12. GAP diary, Oct. 24, 2011.

Two weeks later, I met with several officials in the Church's Public Affairs Department. As was the case with Jensen, the surprise to them was the demographics of the group. I told them I had spent three hours the prior evening meeting with thirty bright upperclassmen from Brigham Young University, answering questions that didn't deviate one bit from the faith crisis survey list. While the questions were not new to me, they were to the students—future leaders—and many of them were having serious problems holding on to their faith.¹³

Talking to the Brethren

More than a month passed with no word from Jensen about Stratford meeting with his colleagues. He wrote to Stratford, "I have been here for a long time. . . . You can't expect external pressure to facilitate the change, because they will just dig in their heels, and it won't happen. So, for the good of everything and of everyone, we need to do this strategically and at its own pace."¹⁴

In early February 2012, more than three months following the meeting in Manhattan, Stratford got the green light for the Salt Lake City meeting.¹⁵ Two days before the appointed date, I phoned Jensen and asked if he thought the faith crisis was real. He was certain of it. "There may be fifteen people in one ward, or three people in one stake, but I see it everywhere."¹⁶

Stratford was thrilled with the meeting, which included the ecclesiastical directors of several crucial departments.¹⁷ The meeting was all-male. Predictable was a bit of naysaying. "Oh, this is such a small percentage of the population. It's probably just North America." Rick Turley, assistant church historian, responded: "No, I was in Mongolia,

13. GAP diary, Nov. 11, 2011.

14. GAP diary, Nov. 30, 2011.

15. GAP diary, Feb. 7, 2012.

16. GAP diary, Feb. 21, 2012.

17. GAP diary, Feb. 24, 2012.

and I was getting questions about the Kinderhook plates and polyandry. This is a global issue that we are facing.”

Then the group took in the data and asked probing questions. At the end of the meeting, Stratford received congratulations from several people in the room: “This is amazing.” “It’s groundbreaking.” “This is huge!” Jensen said, “This has been amazing. I have lots of follow-up items. I’ll call you, Travis.”

And then, silence. Despite the enthusiasm in the room, no one from the all-important First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve was present. They are the “deciders.” The silence persisted for more than a year, and then we elected to do an end-run.

Meanwhile, More Crisis

In the meantime, signs of the toll of faith crisis periodically popped up. Using data published by the Church each year at its general conference, one analyst did simple arithmetic and showed an alarming trend that should have provoked a strong response but did not. Rather than track the raw number of total membership year-over-year, which does not account for dropouts, he charted the annual percentage increase in LDS congregations worldwide, a reliable metric of actual growth. Between 2004 and 2011, it dropped fourfold, to only 0.43 percent.¹⁸ By contrast, the average annual increase of congregations from 1971 to 1981 was 11.6 percent, nearly *thirtyfold* higher. Over half the recent growth could be accounted for simply by births among current LDS families.

Two months after Stratford’s meeting, I met with Jensen and Steven Snow, his successor as Church Historian.¹⁹ Snow suggested one would have to go back to World War II to find a faith crisis like the present one. He noted LDS troops had been deployed all over the world, often leaving their hometowns for the first time, and were not prepared for other thinking, values, and habits. When they came home, it was

18. GAP diary, Apr. 1, 2012.

19. GAP diary, Apr. 18, 2012.

difficult for many of them to reengage with the Church. “We basically lost a generation.”

Ultimately, the Church commissioned thirteen essays to address the troubling issues. Some were written by Church employees while others were commissioned with outside authors.

The Mormon Moment

None of this was happening in a vacuum. Two things were occurring simultaneously that impacted what we, Jensen, and his colleagues were trying to do. The first was the opening on Broadway in 2011 of *The Book of Mormon*, an irreverent and wildly successful musical now (2026) in its sixteenth year. Initially irritated by the production, ecclesiastical leaders soon shifted gears and leveraged its popularity. Three months after the musical opened, they launched an “I’m a Mormon” campaign in New York City that included a stories-high billboard in Times Square.²⁰

The second was the candidacy of Mitt Romney for the presidency of the United States. His candidacy caused Church president Thomas Monson to announce privately to his colleagues that the Church would avoid all national political activities until after the November 2012 election.²¹ That level of sensitivity undoubtedly played a role in delaying the faith crisis essays. Three months after the election, Darius Gray told me Paul Reeve had been informed by the Church that “the brakes had been applied” to his paper on race and priesthood, and his essay “likely wouldn’t see the light of day for at least a year.”²² Since we had heard nothing of any of the other twelve essays, I assumed the brakes had been applied to all of them.

20. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Mormon.org ‘I’m a Mormon’ Effort Launches in New York City,” Newsroom, June 16, 2011, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/mormon-ads-new-york-city/>.

21. GAP diary, June 21, 2011.

22. GAP diary, Feb. 19, 2013.

The Group

In June 2012, I received an email from Robert Rees, whom I had known for more than forty years, beginning with his tenure as editor of *Dialogue*. He proposed creating a small group to address faith crisis issues.²³ It never had more than about eight members, met infrequently, had no name, and kept a low profile.²⁴ Three key members were Travis Stratford and Chase and Grethe Peterson. The Petersons were well-connected in Salt Lake circles, largely because Chase had been president of the University of Utah.

Our first meeting, which spanned two days, began on November 30, 2012, at the Petersons' condominium.²⁵ Our purpose was to do something substantive to help those struggling with faith crisis.

On the second day, Stratford gave a presentation of his faith crisis survey, something few in the group had seen. When he finished, we had a consensus that the survey represented our best chance to effect change. Since it had languished for nearly a year, presumably bottled up in the Quorum of the Twelve, we saw only one other option: plow around the Twelve and go to the First Presidency, specifically to Dieter Uchtdorf. Because he spent most of his life in Germany and traveled the world constantly as a Lufthansa pilot, Uchtdorf had a progressive worldview distinctly different from that of his colleagues in the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, one most receptive to the message of the faith crisis survey.

The question was how to deliver a copy of the survey to Uchtdorf in a way that he would read it. Chase was an obvious messenger, but he was cautious. After the meeting ended, he said to me, "Tell me you are confident that Travis's and your data about faith crisis are solid." "They are." "Okay. Then I will proceed to contact Dieter Uchtdorf."²⁶

23. GAP diary, June 27, 2012.

24. GAP diary, Aug. 2, 2012.

25. GAP diary, Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, 2012.

26. GAP diary, Dec. 1, 2012.

The Petersons approached him through an intermediary, and Uchtdorf signaled he was willing to speak with them.²⁷ However, getting onto his calendar proved problematic because the Church president, Thomas Monson, was sinking deeply into dementia, and Uchtdorf had to pick up much of the slack.²⁸ Nearly three months after our meeting, Grethe called Marlin Jensen for advice. He volunteered to hand-carry a copy to Uchtdorf.

Jensen advised us that timing was crucial and asked that we trust him to pick the right time so the printed material would be read rather than filed. The right time turned out to be late June, just prior to the monthlong July vacation General Officers take.

In late August, Chase and Grethe met Uchtdorf for lunch. He said he had read the faith crisis report completely, thought very highly of it, and had no pushback on its conclusions, unlike many of his colleagues. We subsequently learned it had a far greater impact than we might have supposed, but more on that later. The group had done its most important work.²⁹

The New York Times

Stratford had a longstanding friendship with Laurie Goodstein, a religion writer for the *New York Times*, and she had expressed interest in the story of Hans Mattsson. Stratford had tried to persuade him to meet with Goodstein when he came to New York for our Manhattan meeting in 2011, but he had demurred. Much had happened to him in intervening months, most of it not pleasant, and when Stratford revisited the possibility of an interview, Mattsson consented.

27. GAP diary, Jan. 2, 2013.

28. President Monson's dementia was being shielded from the public at the time, but several sources told me about it on condition of anonymity.

29. GAP diary, March 30, 2015.

In June 2013, Stratford, Hans, and his wife Birgitte came to my home in Maryland for two days of preparation prior to his interview in New York City.³⁰ On June 13, the three met with Goodstein for five hours, and again the following day for a videotaped interview.³¹ Later, Stratford called me and said, “It felt a little bit historic as it was happening.”³² He was right.

On July 20, a Saturday, Stratford sent me an email saying the article would probably be published that weekend. It was posted online that evening and printed on the front page of the Sunday edition of the *Times*, “Some Mormons Search the Web and Find Doubt.” The shot heard ’round the Mormon world. Excerpts include:

When fellow believers in Sweden first began coming to [Mattsson] with information from the Internet that contradicted the church’s history and teachings, he dismissed it as “anti-Mormon propaganda,” the whisperings of Lucifer. He asked his superiors for help in responding to the members’ doubts, and when they seemed to only sidestep the questions, Mr. Mattsson began his own investigation.

But when he discovered credible evidence that the church’s founder, Joseph Smith, was a polygamist and that the Book of Mormon and other scriptures were rife with historical anomalies, Mr. Mattsson said he felt that the foundation on which he had built his life began to crumble.

Around the world and in the United States, where the faith was founded, the Mormon Church is grappling with a wave of doubt and disillusionment among members who encountered information on the Internet that sabotaged what they were taught about their faith . . .

“I felt like I had an earthquake under my feet,” said Mr. Mattsson, now an emeritus area authority. “Everything I’d been taught, everything I’d been proud to preach about and witness about just crumbled under my feet. It was such a terrible psychological and nearly physical disturbance.”

30. GAP diary, June 9, 2013.

31. GAP diary, June 14, 2013.

32. GAP diary, June 17, 2013.

Greg Prince, a Mormon historian and businessman in Washington who has held local leadership positions in the church, shares Mr. Mattsson's doubts. "Consider a Catholic cardinal suddenly going to the media and saying about his own church, 'I don't buy a lot of this stuff,'" Mr. Prince said. "That's the level we're talking about here." . . .

The first doubts filtered up to [Mattsson] from members who had turned to the Internet to research a Sunday school talk. . . .

Mr. Mattsson said he sought the help of the church's highest authorities. He said a senior apostle came to Sweden at his request and told a meeting of Mormons that he had a manuscript in his briefcase that, once it was published, would prove all the doubters wrong. But Mr. Mattsson said the promised text never appeared, and when he asked the apostle about it, he was told it was impertinent to ask. . . .

That encounter is what really set off Mr. Mattsson's doubts. He began reading everything he could. . . .

In the last 10 or 15 years, [Richard Bushman] said, "the church has come to realize that transparency and candor and historical accuracy are really the only way to go." The church has released seven volumes of the papers of Joseph Smith and published an essay on one of the most shameful events in church history, the Mountain Meadows massacre, in which church leaders plotted the slaughter of people in a wagon train in 1857.

But the church has not actively disseminated most of these documents, so when members come across them on Web sites or in books, Mr. Bushman said, "it's just excruciating."

"Sometimes people are furious because they feel they haven't been told the truth growing up," he said. "They feel like they were tricked or betrayed."³³

Any article on Mormonism in the *New York Times* gets attention, but an article on the front page of the *Sunday Times* gets a *lot* of attention. The day after it was published, Stratford told me it was the number one most-viewed and number two most-emailed article in the *Times*

33. Laurie Goodstein, "Some Mormons Search the Web and Find Doubt," *New York Times*, July 21, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/us/some-mormons-search-the-web-and-find-doubt.html>.

over the prior two days. Comments flooded the “bloggernacle,” a nickname for blogs relating to Mormonism.

The following Saturday, the *Times* published a brief letter from Rabbi Harold Kushner, best-selling author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*:

It will be interesting to see how the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints deal with the apparent coming to light of facts to cast doubt on the validity of its founding narrative.

Might I suggest that they use the tactic used by many modern Jews dealing with biblical narratives that defy credulity, from a six-day story of creation to Jonah living inside a large fish. We distinguish between left-brain narratives (meant to convey factual truth) and right-brain narratives (meant to make a point through a story; the message will be true even if the story isn't factually defensible).³⁴

Breaking the Logjam

Two weeks after the *Times* article was published, I met Steven Snow for breakfast. He acknowledged the difficulty they had had in getting the essays through the approval process, particularly the intransigent president of the Quorum of the Twelve, Boyd Packer. The *Times* article had given urgency to the issue. Some of the Twelve were now saying, “We’ve got to get this going.”³⁵

Getting the essays out was a major challenge, but *how* to get them out was equally daunting. Although no one had accurate data on how many Church members were troubled by historical issues, there was a consensus that it was nowhere near a majority. The same essay that addressed the doubts of the few doubters could blow up the faith of the many faithful.

34. Harold Kushner, “Religion and Doubt,” Opinion, *New York Times*, July 27, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/opinion/religion-and-doubt.html>.

35. GAP diary, Aug. 1, 2013.

“Houston, We Have a Problem”

Faith crisis had long been the elephant in the room. A month after the *Times* article, the Church finally acknowledged its presence after years of denial at the highest levels, in an article in the Church-owned *Deseret News*, “How LDS Church members can help themselves and loved ones deal with doubt.”³⁶ It began, “David Marsh [a manager in the Church’s priesthood department] opened his BYU Campus Education Week class with a question. ‘How many of you know someone struggling with doubt?’ he asked the audience. Nearly everyone reached a hand toward the ceiling.” While not mentioning any specific issue leading to faith crisis, the article moved the needle by acknowledging the problem and urging non-doubting members to be understanding of those who doubted—a marked contrast from the earlier derision heaped on Hans Mattsson.

Three weeks after the *Deseret News* article was published, I delivered the annual Leonard J. Arrington Lecture in Logan, Utah. At a small banquet preceding the lecture, I sat next to Steven Snow. He said some of the essays were on the agenda of the Quorum of the Twelve the following week, and he anticipated approval.

The German Comes Through

On October 5, 2013, Dieter Uchtdorf gave the closing address in the first session of general conference. Shortly afterwards, Bill Evans, a high-ranking official in the Church’s Public Affairs office with whom I had shared the faith crisis survey, sent me an email: “Did you ghostwrite this talk?”³⁷

36. Katie Harmer, “How LDS Church Members Can Help Themselves and Loved Ones Deal with Doubt,” *Deseret News*, Aug. 27, 2013, <https://www.deseret.com/2013/8/27/20524591/how-lds-church-members-can-help-themselves-and-loved-ones-deal-with-doubt/>.

37. GAP diary, Oct. 5, 2013.

That evening, Laurie Goodstein posted an article on the *New York Times* website commenting on Uchtdorf's historic speech:

One of the top leaders in the Mormon Church acknowledged in an address to the church's global membership on Saturday that past leaders had "made mistakes" that had caused some Mormons to have doubts, an admission that amounts to a significant change in tone in the leadership's approach to Mormons who question, dissent or defect from the church.

"We respect those who honestly search for truth," President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, second counselor in the church's top governing body, the first presidency, said in the speech.

The church has in the past excommunicated prominent scholars and even low-profile members who publicly voiced doubts about its history or theology, and many Mormons who have lost their faith have been shunned by their friends and family. But recently, with some Mormons taking to the Internet to share their doubts, leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which now claims 15 million members, have been confronted with a bigger problem they could no longer ignore.

"We openly acknowledge that in nearly 200 years of church history—along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honorable and divine events—there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question," Mr. Uchtdorf said, speaking to 20,000 Mormons gathered for the 183rd semiannual general conference in Salt Lake City, and millions more watching telecasts and over the Internet. . . .

He said it was wrong for other Mormons to assume that those with doubts "have been offended or lazy or sinful." He said that the church "honors personal agency."³⁸

Subsequent sermons in the same conference took a hardline stance against marriage equality and ordination of women, indirect shots at

38. Laurie Goodstein, "A Top Mormon Leader Acknowledges the Church 'Made Mistakes,'" *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/06/us/a-top-mormon-leader-acknowledges-the-church-made-mistakes.html>.

Uchtdorf's remarks,³⁹ but Uchtdorf had laid a new marker that gave hope to those struggling with faith crisis.

Michael Otterson, the Church's director of public affairs, took exception to Laurie Goodstein's use of the word "mistakes," and he reached out to Dieter Uchtdorf, saying he was getting inquiries as to what he meant by using the word. Uchtdorf responded that he crafted his words precisely for the address, and he had no further comments for Otterson.⁴⁰

Few people in the entire Church even knew of the existence of the faith crisis survey or the summary we had hand-delivered to Dieter Uchtdorf in June. Those of us who knew kept it to ourselves. His words stood on their own. For us to spike the ball in the endzone would have been tasteless and counterproductive.

A month after Uchtdorf's speech, the Church, without announcement, posted the first of the essays, "Are Mormons Christians?"⁴¹

"Race and the Priesthood"

I knew almost nothing of the makings of twelve of the thirteen essays. For "Race and the Priesthood," however, I saw the sausage in the making, primarily because of my long and trusting friendship with Darius Gray, arguably the most prominent Black Church member ever. He did not write the essay or its antecedent research paper (which Paul Reeve wrote), but he was brought in at the eleventh hour to avert what could have been a catastrophic mistake.

39. Laurie Goodstein, "A Leader's Admission of 'Mistakes' Heartens Some Doubting Mormons," *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/09/us/a-leaders-admission-of-mistakes-heartens-some-doubting-mormons.html>.

40. GAP diary, Nov. 19, 2013.

41. "Are 'Mormons' Christian?," *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/christians?lang=eng/>.

Gray, who joined the Church in 1964, had been a leader in the African American LDS community since the early 1970s, when Church leaders organized the Genesis Group Branch and called him to be part of its three-man presidency. He served in that council, sometimes as its president, for several decades, often being consulted on matters relating to race.

On Monday, December 2, 2013, Gray received a phone call from a secretary at the Church History Department, asking if he could attend a meeting the following day. She did not give him any information regarding the content of the meeting.⁴²

The following evening, he called and debriefed me. Paul Reeve's commissioned research paper notwithstanding, Church bureaucrats (and probably one or more apostles) had essentially written their own essay. Seeing problems with it, the historians sought advice from Gray. Their instructions to him: "We really would appreciate you being candid."⁴³

The paper was problematic on several levels, primarily because it dodged the crucial issue of when and by whom the restriction on ordination of Black men occurred: by Brigham Young, after the death of Joseph Smith. And definitely not by God. There was one other challenge: they needed the paper to be revised *now*, although in the meeting they did not say why. Gray candidly told them what needed to be changed.

He called me again on Thursday evening, saying he had received another call from Church headquarters, asking that he be there at 9 a.m. on Friday.

We had dinner guests on Friday. Just before they arrived, I received an email from Gray:

"The material that I was involved with this past week turns out to be part of the NEW Church website on Race. I haven't had a chance to review the entire site, but it seems a far cry from that which had been proposed."

42. GAP diary, Dec. 2, 2013.

43. GAP diary, Dec. 3, 2013.

It was quite different from the essay-by-committee, and groundbreaking:

- It placed the priesthood ban in the context of “an era of great racial division in the United States,” with slavery influencing “all aspects of people’s lives, including their religion.”
- During Joseph Smith’s lifetime, several Black men were ordained.
- Brigham Young started the ban. God did not.
- None of the explanations for the ban—including the “curse of Cain”—was an official doctrine of the Church.

After our guests left, I spoke with Gray. On Thursday, the Quorum of the Twelve had approved the changes. The purpose of Friday’s meeting was to have him take a final look at the document. He was the final outside reviewer before the essay was posted online. The day after the posting, Stratford sent me an email: “Steve Snow sent a nice note saying our FC [Faith Crisis] work helped get this out.”⁴⁴

Several days later, the *Salt Lake Tribune* quoted Richard Bushman: “‘It is written as a historian might tell the story,’ Bushman says from his home in New York, ‘not as a theological piece, trying to justify the practice.’ By depicting the exclusion as fitting with the common practices of the day, says Bushman, who wrote *Rough Stone Rolling*, a critically acclaimed biography of Smith, ‘it drains the ban of revelatory significance, makes it something that just grew up and, in time, had to be eliminated.’”⁴⁵

Two months after the essay was posted, I had breakfast with Steven Snow. He said it was, by a factor of about five, the most read of all the essays.⁴⁶ The following month, I had breakfast with Paul Reeve. He said the event that had catalyzed the commissioning of his research paper

44. GAP diary, Dec. 7, 2013.

45. Peggy Fletcher Stack, “Mormon Church Traces Black Priesthood Ban to Brigham Young,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Dec. 16, 2013, available at <https://archive.slttrib.com/article.php?id=57241071&itype=CMSID>.

46. GAP diary, Feb. 4, 2014.

was an article in the *Washington Post* in February 2012 that highlighted racist comments by a BYU professor, Randy Bott.⁴⁷ Bott's inflammatory comments, which resulted in his "retirement" from BYU, caused an immediate, public, and unprecedented reaction by Church Public Affairs. Within a week, Reeve was commissioned to write his paper. Two members of the Quorum of the Twelve liked his paper, but one—probably Boyd Packer—sent it to the Correlation Department, and that was where it devolved into the hot mess that Gray later had to clean up to avoid a catastrophe.⁴⁸

The Other Essays

The remaining essays trickled out over several months. Some took notable strides toward historical accuracy. For instance, the Church acknowledged publicly, for the first time, that the "translation" of the Book of Mormon involved Joseph Smith looking at a stone in his hat, with his face pressed tightly against the hat to block extraneous light. And it acknowledged that Joseph Smith took his first plural wife, Fanny Alger, in 1835, seven years before the revelation that authorized the practice.

Overall, the essays represented a balancing act, attempting to answer nagging historical questions without tipping over orthodox members. The glass was half full for everyone, but because of the position the Church had taken decades earlier of hiding parts of its history, half full was the best it could do. Nearly a year after the essay on race and priesthood was posted, Stratford sent me an email: "When Laurie [Goodstein of the *New York Times*] was interviewing Steve Snow a couple of weeks ago (when Steve was talking about the Church's new

47. Jason Horowitz, "The Genesis of a Church's Stand on Race," *Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-genesis-of-a-churchs-stand-on-race/2012/02/22/gIQAQZZyfr_story.html.

48. GAP diary, March 7, 2014.

focus on transparency), Laurie couldn't stop thinking that the primary reason they are doing this is because of the Faith Crisis work we did."⁴⁹

The Beat Goes On

As significant as the essays were, they had little overall effect in addressing faith crisis churchwide. A year and a half after the first essays were posted online, Darius Gray told me Church officials had told him only 20 percent of Church members even knew of their existence, and only 4 percent had read *any* of them.⁵⁰

Even if more members of the Church had read the essays, it is doubtful that would have addressed the larger issues underlying faith crisis. The essays focused on one of the three “cards” the Church can play—truth claims—and for the younger generations, truth claims tend to be irrelevant.⁵¹

A Story That Doesn't Work

In July 2016, Richard Bushman spoke to a group in Salt Lake City. In the Q&A following his remarks, he made a profound statement about the Church's status quo and the need for it to change:

I think that for the church to remain strong it has to reconstruct its narrative. The dominant narrative is not true; it can't be sustained. So, the church has to absorb all this new information, or it will be on very shaky grounds and that's what it is trying to do, and it will be a strain for a lot of people, older people especially. But I think it has to change.

You know Elder [Boyd] Packer had a sense of protecting the little people. He felt that scholars were the “enemy” to the “state.” And it was the Grandmothers that were living in Sanpete County. . . . The price of

49. GAP diary, Nov. 11, 2014.

50. GAP diary, March 1, 2015.

51. See Jana Riess's work on this, including in *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

protecting the grandmothers was the loss of the grandsons. They got a story that did not work.⁵²

The Faith Crisis Survey Lives On

In January 2017, I received an email from Stratford confirming that our faith crisis survey of 2011 continued to have an effect:

I just got a random call from one of the head guys at the Church's Research & Information Division (RID) who deals in "sensitive" research like "difficult topics" and faith crisis.

He called to explain that our Faith Crisis Report and Faith Crisis Chronicles⁵³ documents have been circulating amongst the top Brethren the past couple of years and that they'd like to officially enter the documents into their research library so other leaders (who have top-level clearance) can access the documents.

Of note during the call, he said that Elder Ballard had consumed the research and had become an ardent advocate for the church dealing with it. . . .

Feels good that our work made at least a small difference.⁵⁴

The Story Continues

No one knows the precise number of Church members who have disengaged because of faith crisis. While the Church keeps track of those who formally resign their membership (a closely held number), it is unknown how many people who become disaffected simply withdraw from activity.

52. GAP diary, July 12, 2016.

53. The "Faith Crisis Chronicles" was a compilation of personal essays that we solicited following the initial social media questionnaire. We did the compilation at the suggestion of Clayton Christensen, who felt raw numbers told only part of the story. He was right. The stories were wrenching but accurately conveyed the profound personal toll that faith crisis was taking.

54. Travis Stratford to GAP, Jan. 6, 2017, in GAP diary of the same date.

Many people who have left the Church did so because they encountered opacity instead of transparency. The Church is making progress. Its newest multivolume history, *Saints*, is far more candid than previous histories published by the Church. Curricula for children and youth are being infused with more reliable data than in the past. But still, it is a long way from here to total transparency.

During the “Mormon Moment” in 2012, the year Mitt Romney was the Republican candidate for president, I was contacted by Michelle Boorstein, a religion reporter for the *Washington Post*. She had been assigned to do reporting on Romney’s religious affiliation, and she asked if she could meet with me to get up to speed on Mormonism.

We met several times, and during one of our meetings she commented on her own religious tradition, Judaism. “Discussion and argumentation are the lifeblood of Judaism. What is the mechanism within Mormonism that allows for this?” My response took her breath away: “There is none, Michelle, and if one attempts to create one, Church leaders are likely to shut it down.”

That is a problem. Where does a Latter-day Saint go to discuss difficult, controversial issues central to their faith? If the Church does not provide a safe space or encourage Church members to create their own, it will be the loser, for the members likely will find another space that is not sympathetic.

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