

## **WORKING OUR WAY THROUGH, I: MORMONISM, THE CONTINUING QUESTION**

by Tom Cox

Changes in American society during the last quarter of the nineteenth century challenged the First Presbyterian Church. National and even international developments tested the capacity of the Presbyterians and other mainline Protestants to remain relevant to the issues facing the nation. But not all the challenges came from places far removed from Pocatello. Mormonism — an issue in First Presbyterian from its founding — although not always openly — came to the forefront once more.

During the last decades of the twentieth century, the LDS church began a period of explosive growth. Recognizing the challenge this presented Presbyterians, in 1979 Westminster College sponsored a symposium on “Ministry in Mormon Areas.” That same year First Presbyterian’s session received a letter “expressing concern regarding Mormon influences in the church” — presumably because the church’s choir director and organist were LDS members. Later in the year, Dr. Edwin House of ISU — who taught early morning Bible study classes for years and has been described by Paul Link as a “stern, strong-willed and totally sincere person . . . [whose] actions were always principled and grounded in what he saw as Christian duty” — joined Leigh Gittins in a presentation to session on Mormon beliefs and practices. They prepared a “thesis” on the subject, which the session adopted in May 1980 as an official position paper of the church — although not without dissent — and forwarded it to presbytery’s Nurture and Development Committee “for possible distribution to other churches.” There things sat until July 1981, when House and Gittins complained that they were “disturbed . . . their LDS paper had not been actively promoted by session or Presbytery. . . .” Session, it would seem, had no great desire to plunge into the sticky subject of Mormonism, but it had copies of the House-Gittins piece printed for each of its members.

The Rev. Wells was less confrontational than House and Gittins. In his sermon during the celebration accompanying the opening of the cornerstone on June 17, 1979, he sounded a conciliatory note. “Today,” he said, “. . . our church faces a variety of new challenges.” Among others, “We wonder if the growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day [sic] Saints in our area will continue, for fear has developed in recent years that life will be more difficult as those of us in the non-L.D.S. sector become more and more of a minority in the community. . . . Living together in harmony with our brothers and sisters of the world is our new challenge, and that is really not so different from Paul’s challenge to the early church. . . . Ultimately . . . it is not simply a small isolated church, [but] . . . society itself that needs to be mortared into a structure of mutual respect where the spirit of God binds each to the rest.”

Still, the LDS issue would not die. Concerned Christians, an aggressive evangelical organization founded in 1980, launched an anti-Mormon crusade built around “The Godmakers,” a film that painted Mormonism as a cult built on lies and deception and engaged in a conspiracy to undermine true Christianity. There was an outcry when the film was shown in Phoenix, Arizona — where the LDS church was growing by leaps and bounds — and that area’s chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) appointed an inter-denominational committee (including two Presbyterians) to investigate. Its report was scathing. The film, the

committee concluded, “relies heavily on appeals to fear, prejudice, and other less worthy human emotions.” It did not “fairly portray the Mormon church, Mormon history, or Mormon belief” and posed a “genuine danger to the climate of good will and harmony” in the area; “fair-minded people who happen to view this film, would be appalled by it,” for experience had shown that Mormons were “good friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens.” Concerned Christians was quick to rebut the charges. No one with an “Evangelical or fundamental Christian” outlook, a spokesman pointed out, had been named to the investigating committee, so criticism of the film did not need to be taken seriously. When the film was shown to First Presbyterian’s youth group, there was an outcry from members who viewed the film much as NCCJ’s committee had and a defense by others who thought, in light of the religious realities of the Pocatello area, that the story needed to be told. Complaints went to session, which tried to smooth over the differences, noting that the film had been shown to a group of Mormons and they found nothing inaccurate or offensive in it — an assertion that seems suspect, to say the least. Ere long, other concerns pushed Mormonism into the background, but for a time the issue remained divisive.

The Rev. Coke McClure, who replaced Jack Wells in 1986, did not join in the assault on Mormons. As he once told this author, in spite of all their doctrinal errors, he found it difficult to be too confrontational with the LDS church, for like that of the Presbyterians it was a “people’s church” in which laity played a key role in church government and even preached. Indeed, the similarities in governance and approach were not wholly coincidental. Before marching off in his own direction, Joseph Smith had attended a Presbyterian church.

But the issue of Mormon relations did not remain submerged for long. About the time the Rev. Jim Cramer began as FPC’s pastor, ISU graduate student Paul Elison also began service as director of the Chancel Choir — and the appointment was attended by controversy. The choice of Elison had followed an unsuccessful attempt by a sub-committee of the Worship and Music Committee to locate a qualified candidate who had a background in the Reformed tradition. Elison’s church affiliation was LDS, but he was recommended by Dr. Scott Anderson, Choral Director at ISU (himself a Presbyterian), and was subsequently hired. Elison’s appointment led to a re-emergence of dissatisfaction expressed privately by some members in the past over the hiring of LDS music leaders, even though the choir had flourished in previous years, both in morale and the quality of music offered, under various LDS Choir Directors and organists — among them James Drake, Keith Forrest, and Larry Anderson (admittedly, however, their responsibilities to their own churches on occasion interrupted their service to FPC). Some members of First Presbyterian believed strongly that worship leadership, including music, should be in the hands of those whose doctrines were compatible with the Reformed faith. On the occasion of Elison’s appointment, session received a letter of disapproval, but it chose to support the sub-committee’s recommendation, and the appointment stood. No doubt aware of the tension, Elison worked hard to learn and respect Presbyterian traditions.

When Elison left in the summer of 2000 to pursue doctoral work at the University of Oregon, the search committee once more was unable to locate a qualified director with a Reformed background. In the end, it recommended Dan Child, another of Dr. Anderson’s students and also an LDS member. Again a letter of objection was sent to session stressing that the “choir director, as any church leader, should share our doctrines and faith.” As before, session stood by the appointment, apparently believing, as Child himself later put it that “the holy Spirit can be

found and felt whenever the Lord's praises are sung." But an element of discontent continued, helping to create an atmosphere of dissatisfaction with the church that was to haunt Jim Cramer's ministry. Not until Child left in the spring of 2001 following his graduation from ISU and was replaced by ISU faculty member David Gonzol — whose Anabaptist background was more widely acceptable — did the muted criticism cease.

Still, the issue would not die. When the Rev. Cramer chose to make the topic of one sermon an exposition of the idea that the Mormon church was not Christian, he unnerved many in the congregation. Relations with the LDS community had, of course, been a factor in the history of First Presbyterian from the first, and how best to counter its work a question that came up repeatedly, but Cramer's frontal assault seemed to some to be unwise and counter-productive. It gave the appearance of aligning Cramer with the fundamentalists then protesting against the LDS church in Salt Lake City's Temple Square, protests which that city's First Presbyterian Church, among others, had disavowed. Elder Cal Wheelock, then serving as Commissioner to Synod, was among those members of FPC troubled by Cramer's sermon. LDS theology might be badly flawed, but Mormons were good people and good neighbors, he said, expressing ideas akin to those used earlier when the Arizona chapter of NCCJ evaluated the anti-Mormon film "The Godmakers."

That the position of the Presbyterian church vis-à-vis the Mormons was a subject of debate from the days of S. E. Wishard to those of Jim Cramer, should come as no surprise. Mormonism is a central reality of southeastern Idaho. Perhaps Jack Wells came as close as anyone to a satisfactory answer to how the issue should be approached, one that remained true to Presbyterian principles, but warned against destructive and fruitless frontal assaults. His words bear repeating: "Living together in harmony with our brothers and sisters of the world is our new challenge, and that is really not so different from Paul's challenge to the early church. . . . Ultimately . . . it is not simply a small isolated church, [but] . . . society itself that needs to be mortared into a structure of mutual respect where the spirit of God binds each to the rest." Of course, not everyone agreed, either then or later, but when First Presbyterian entered a float in the Mormon's Pioneer Day Parade in 2004 (and took second place!) it was an action consistent with the spirit of the Rev. Wells's remarks. In spite of this, it must be recognized that the relationship of First Presbyterian to its Mormon neighbors is likely to continue to be a subject of debate well into the future.