

*Gay Rights and the Mormon Church:
Intended Actions, Unintended Consequences*

By Gregory A. Prince

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Reviewed by W. Justin Dyer

In this book, Gregory Prince compiles and examines available records of how individual leaders within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Church as an institution have approached issues of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The compilation is most welcome as it provides many useful sources to understand how the Church and its leaders have discussed and acted on these issues. The book is an important reference, and I have gone back to it again and again to reference its timelines and sources.

Among these sources are documents, as well as interviews Prince conducted with involved individuals, adding rich texture to the narrative. Individuals' stories are also included, helping the reader understand the personal side of the events Prince details. The book thus provides data from multiple sources in creating its narrative.

While others have reviewed the book as a whole, this review focuses on two aspects of the book that are particularly important for readers to understand and that deserve more attention than could be accomplished in a general review. The first is Prince's use of official Church sources and the second is his use of statistics to tie the Church's actions to LGBTQ suicide.

Use of Official Church Sources

Prince acknowledges some readers may see an imbalance in his narrative because it contains little material supportive of the Church's positions. Given no Church leaders agreed to be interviewed for this book, Prince affirms that any perceived imbalance in the narrative is a result of "their decision, not mine" (x). I myself have attempted (unsuccessfully) to interview Church leaders about several issues addressed in this book, and I sympathize with the desire to have additional official details. The book's

narrative, however, appears to discount what primary Church sources do exist, giving them less weight than unsubstantiated claims.

For instance, in addressing the November 2015 policy that required children of those in same-sex marriages to have First Presidency approval to be blessed and baptized,¹ Prince claims, “The church has never disclosed the details of its genesis” (258). As a source for the policy’s genesis, Prince uses what he refers to as a “published report”; however, this report is a theory from an online commentary that uses an anonymous source. This source is apparently an “official with routine access to members of the governing councils of the church” (259), though it is unclear who this official is or what specific role he or she might have.

In contrast to this anonymous source, Elder D. Todd Christofferson gave an interview two days after the policy was released in which he discusses the policy’s genesis. Elder Christofferson states the policy was, in part, born out of concern for children who may experience conflict between parents and Church. Elder Christofferson goes on to describe that the policy is in line with other longstanding policies such as the policy regarding children living in polygamous families, who may face similar circumstances. Unfortunately, Prince treats this official Church interview as simply “damage control” (260), sidestepping any serious treatment of it by saying: “What Todd Christofferson was selling, many weren’t buying” (261). In addressing this issue, the book unfortunately omits a detailed discussion of the Church’s official reasoning, giving preference to an anonymous online source.

The book contains other anonymous and secondhand accounts that feel out of balance with the available, well-documented information. For instance, in speculating how General Authorities felt about the November policy, Prince cites an interview with Bryce Cook (an economic advisor and a founding member of Arizona LDS LGBT Friends & Family), who said that a General Authority told a small group of Church members that “the majority are unhappy with this policy . . . and the way the procedure got pushed down on them” (266). It is unclear how to treat this second- or thirdhand statement that has no other supporting information.

In other areas of the book, official statements of Church leaders are misrepresented. For instance, Prince states that in 2015, Dallin H. Oaks “vigorously argued against protections for LGBT persons in the arena

1. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Love and Laws of God” (devotional address, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 17, 2019), *BYU Speeches*, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/russell-m-nelson/love-laws-god/>.

of public accommodations” (41). The citation Prince uses is an official transcript of a news conference on religious freedom. It is unclear how Prince came to his conclusion from the transcript of Oaks’s words:

Today, state legislatures across the nation are being asked to strengthen laws related to LGBT issues in the interest of ensuring fair access to housing and employment. The leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is on record as favoring such measures. . . . We call on local, state and the federal government to serve all of their people by passing legislation that protects vital religious freedoms for individuals, families, churches and other faith groups while also protecting the rights of our LGBT citizens in such areas as housing, employment and public accommodation in hotels, restaurants and transportation—protections which are not available in many parts of the country.²

Far from arguing against protections, Oaks explicitly argues for them.

In another instance, sources on early Latter-day Saint theology on the afterlife are misused. The book states: “Mormon afterlife theology began in 1829 where many Christian denominations of the era stood: universal salvation” (315). The evidence used to support that universal salvation was part of early Latter-day Saint theology is the Book of Mormon passage Alma 1:4, which includes the statement that “all mankind should be saved at the last day” (315). However, this statement is by anti-christ Nehor, whose teachings the Book of Mormon decidedly rejects. Although there may be other sources that could support the argument that the early Church had a more universalist approach to salvation, using Alma 1:4 to support the argument is inappropriate.

Suicide

Each life lost to suicide is a tragedy, and combating this rising problem deserves the best efforts of all individuals and institutions. In one chapter, Prince rightly draws attention to the higher rates of suicide among LGBTQ individuals across the nation. These are individuals who require particular attention and care.

Prince frames LGBTQ suicide as an “unintended consequence” of the Church’s teachings and policies—a long-standing, popular inference. He notes, “[Suicide] is the extreme dimension of a far more pervasive

2. “Transcript of News Conference on Religious Freedom and Non-discrimination,” Newsroom, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, January 27, 2015, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/publicstatement-on-religious-freedom-and-nondiscrimination>.

disorder that is caused by people and organizations through their disapproving treatment of LGBT people” (288). The book’s argument relies on two kinds of evidence: statistical and anecdotal. First, Prince infers that suicide rates in Utah are higher than national rates because of a greater number of LGBTQ suicides in Utah—a trend some attribute to the Church. Prince does not cite any statistics to support the claim that Utah LGBTQ youth die by suicide at a higher rate than elsewhere in the country because no such data are available.

Prince also notes that official statistics of Utah suicides do not support claims that suicides increased after the November 2015 policy was announced, but he then refers to these official statistics as “squishy” (292), dismissing them as untrustworthy. His argument begins by correctly stating that there is “a general aversion to declaring suicide as the cause of death,” but he then goes on to claim that this aversion is “particularly strong within Mormonism” (292). His evidence for a greater aversion among Latter-day Saints is Bruce R. McConkie’s statement in the first edition of *Mormon Doctrine* that suicide is similar to murder.³ However, in the second edition, that argument is no longer present and McConkie states that suicide may result from being “mentally clouded” and “such are not to be condemned.”⁴ Prince’s connection between an outdated 1958 statement and a greater likelihood for Latter-day Saints to not report suicide in 2015 is tenuous at best.

Further, even with reporting error, if there were an increase in suicide post November 2015, it would be reflected in the statistics. Yet the year after the November policy saw a 21 percent decrease in youth suicide and a small decrease in suicide of those eighteen to sixty-four years old.⁵

Prince offers other statistics in which, as he states, “one may have confidence” (293). However, these statistics are not contextualized in his book. A statistical report in Prince’s book says, “The youth suicide rate in Utah

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 1st ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 696.

4. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 771.

5. Justin Dyer, “Commentary: Did the Same-Sex Marriage Policy of the LDS Church Coincide with an Increase in Youth Suicide?” *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 2, 2018, <https://www.sltrib.com/opinion/commentary/2018/09/02/commentary-did-same-sex/>; “Suicide Data,” Violence and Injury Data, Violence and Injury Prevention Program, Utah Department of Health, updated November 4, 2019, <http://health.utah.gov/vipp/data/suicide.html>.

has trended upward in recent years, growing at an average rate almost four times faster than the rest of the nation” (293). Although the suicide rate did in fact rise more quickly in Utah than the national average beginning in 2011 (earliest year of the statistics Prince cites), Utah’s overall suicide rate remained relatively the same as that of the surrounding states. Further, the data Prince cites for rising suicide rates does not include the most recent years available (2016, 2017, and 2018).

Regarding suicide rates, the U.S. Center for Disease Control (the CDC) is a highly reliable source.⁶ In 2017 and 2018, the CDC reported that Utah was number six in the country for suicide deaths per capita.⁷ Although tragically high, this rate is comparatively unsurprising; Utah sits within the “suicide belt,” a grouping of states that for various reasons (for example, high elevation, high gun ownership, and low population density) have higher suicide rates than the rest of the nation. Utah’s rates do not stand out within its region.

According to more recent data than what Prince cites, the suicide rate grew 1.34 times nationally and 1.53 times in Utah. Examining states within the suicide belt (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and South Dakota), Utah’s increase is only slightly higher than the average of 1.44 times and lower than the increase in South Dakota (1.81), Montana (2.00), and Colorado (1.58). Utah’s age-adjusted suicide rate in 2017 was statistically indistinguishable from five other states in the region and was significantly lower than Montana.⁸ By attempting to tie Utah suicide rates to the Church (as Prince does), one likely misses regional risk factors that are important to address.

Prince also states, “In 2013, [suicide] is the leading cause of death for Utahns ages 10 to 17 years old, the second-leading cause of death for ages 18–24 and 25–44, and the fourth-leading cause of death for ages 45–64” (293). Although true, suicide was also the leading cause of teen death

6. See <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>.

7. “Underlying Cause of Death, 1999–2018,” CDC Wonder, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed November 19, 2019, <https://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10.html>; “Suicide Mortality by State,” National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed January 10, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm>.

8. “Underlying Cause of Death.”

nationwide.⁹ In some locations, such as Washington, D.C., suicide was not the number one cause of death only because homicide was number one.¹⁰

Unfortunately, there is very little research that specifically examines suicidality by religion in Utah. Prince, however, does not reference the little that does exist. For instance, an analysis by CDC researchers found that between 2011 and 2015 Latter-day Saint youth in Utah were less likely to consider or attempt suicide than their peers of less religious or other religious preferences,¹¹ and another study found that in Utah Latter-day Saint LGB individuals had better mental health than non-Latter-day Saint LGB individuals.¹² This research is omitted in the book.

In addition to statistics, Prince provides anecdotes demonstrating suicide as an unintended consequence of the Church's teachings. These stories are important. Indeed, it is crucial to seek understanding of individual experiences, particularly when they involve pain and difficulties. Research has repeatedly outlined that conflicts may arise between LGBTQ individuals' religious identity and sexual orientation.¹³ It is always important to acknowledge difficulties individuals face and to seek to alleviate pain as much as possible.

With that in mind, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (affiliated with GLAAD and other LGBTQ advocacy groups) has cautioned against simplistic narratives of suicide because they may increase risk for individuals already vulnerable:

9. "Ten Leading Causes of Death and Injury," Injury Prevention & Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last reviewed April 10, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/LeadingCauses.html>.

10. "Compare Cause / States for Fatal Injury Data Visualization Tool," WISQARS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed December 11, 2019, <https://wisqars-viz.cdc.gov:8006/analyze-compare/home>.

11. Francis Annor, Amanda Wilkinson, and Marissa Zwalk, "Epi-Aid # 2017–2019: Undetermined Risk Factors for Suicide among Youth Aged 10–17 years—Utah, 2017: Final Report," Utah Department of Health, November 2017, 46, <http://health.utah.gov/vipp/pdf/Suicide/CDCEpi-AidReport.pdf>.

12. Stephen Cranney, "The LGB Mormon Paradox: Mental, Physical, and Self-Rated Health Among Mormon and Non-Mormon LGB Individuals in the Utah Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System," *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 6 (2017): 731–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1236570>.

13. For example, see Alissa Sherry, Andrew Adelman, Margaret R. Whilde, and Daniel Quick, "Competing Selves: Negotiating the Intersection of Spiritual and Sexual Identities," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 41, no. 2 (2010): 112–19, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017471>.

Don't attribute a suicide death to a single factor (such as bullying or discrimination) or say that a specific anti-LGBT law or policy will "cause" suicide. Suicide deaths are almost always the result of multiple overlapping causes, including mental health issues that might not have been recognized or treated. Linking suicide directly to external factors like bullying, discrimination or anti-LGBT laws can normalize suicide by suggesting that it is a natural reaction to such experiences or laws. It can also increase suicide risk by leading at-risk individuals to identify with the experiences of those who have died by suicide.¹⁴

This statement should not be taken as removing any institution's or individual's responsibility to prevent suicide. As the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention also states, to prevent suicide we should "broadly emphasize individual and collective responsibility for supporting the well-being of LGBT people."¹⁵ This is critical. One suicide is too many, and if the rate is not zero, there is still much to be done. It is important that we discuss difficulties of LGBTQ individuals in the Church and work to understand the unique challenges they face. However, as is done in this book, simplifying suicide to a single source reinforces a narrative that is likely inaccurate and may increase risk.

Conclusion

There is much to commend in this book; it offers important materials and timelines for the Church's involvement in LGBTQ issues and provides an important outline of events, along with references to important documents that allow the reader to dive deeper into the subject. However, the questionable (and, at times, incorrect) use of official Church sources and national and state suicide statistics is a weakness. Thus, though this book provides important details on the Church's efforts in this arena, parts of the book should be read cautiously.

W. Justin Dyer is Associate Professor in Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University. He researches and teaches about family relationships as well as teaches courses on research methods and statistics.

14. Movement Advancement Project, Johnson Family Foundation, and American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "Talking about Suicide & LGBT Populations," 2d ed., MAP's *Talking about LGBT Issues* series (August 2017), 3, <http://www.lgbtmap.org/file/talking-about-suicide-and-lgbt-populations-2nd-edition.pdf>.

15. "Talking about Suicide," 2.