

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

After Buying Kirtland Temple, Church Hopes to Keep It 'Old'

TAD WALCH

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There will be no rush to renovate a historic site Latter-day Saints want to preserve as sacred ground 'where heaven and earth came together'



The sun rises on the Kirtland Ohio Temple in Kirtland, Ohio, on Saturday, Aug. 26, 2023. | Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News

As negotiations for the Kirtland Temple advanced to the final stages six weeks ago, historians began to write a script for tours of the temple that will begin on March 25 under the new direction of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Preparing to reopen the doors to the temple required quick action, but church historians say they will go slow when it comes to making changes to the historic building itself because the Community of Christ wisely avoided modernizing it.

"We're so thrilled that the Kirtland Temple, for example, is in the condition that it's in. It's old. We love that," said Elder Kyle S. McKay, Church Historian and Recorder for the Church of Jesus Christ.

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“The fact that they haven’t changed it, that there isn’t an elevator in it — it’s as close to what it was in Joseph’s day as we would hope and we hope to keep it old, but safe,” he said.

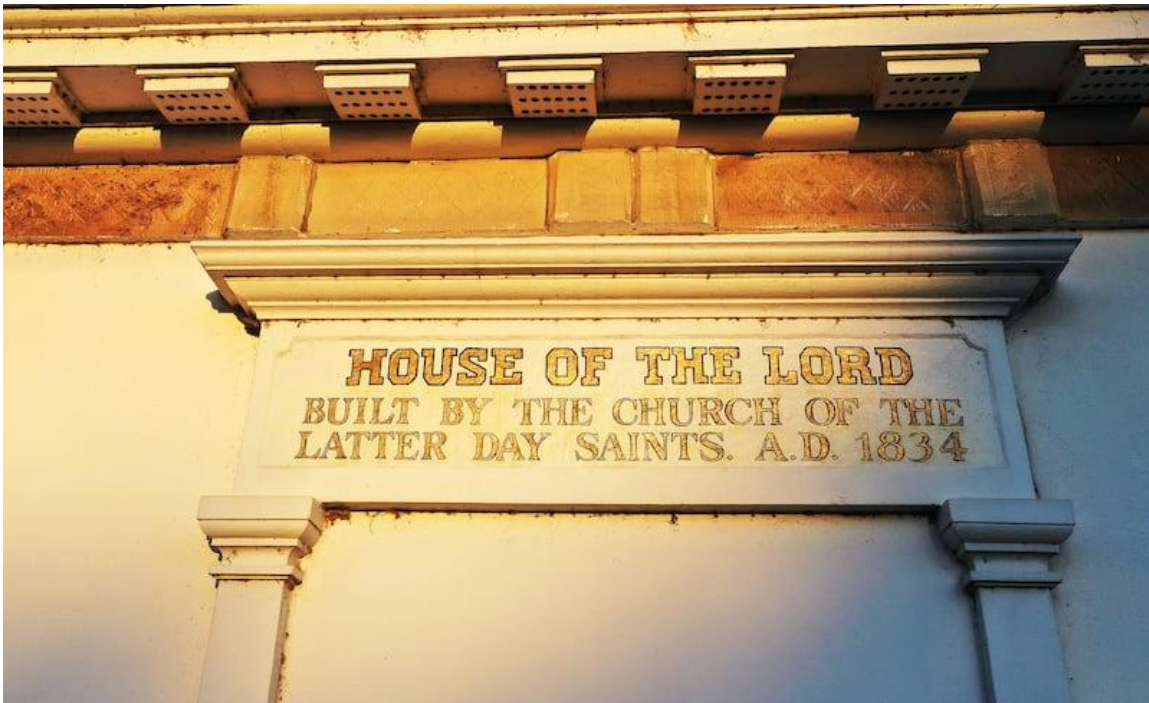
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The Kirtland Temple, dedicated by Joseph Smith in 1836, marked the beginning of temple worship among Latter-day Saints. The temple practices that began there still animate the Church of Jesus Christ and its members today, said Emily Utt, curator of Historic Sites for the church. So do Easter 1836 visitations to the temple of Jesus Christ, Moses, Elias and Elijah, who restored the spiritual power, or keys, that underpin those temple ordinances.

“The power of a place where Jesus Christ has appeared is huge,” she said. “The power of a place where ancient prophets have appeared and restored keys — the way that I live the gospel today, the ability that I have to go to the temple and make covenants and live a holy life is because of the Kirtland Temple. So it is significant to all of us, but it is significant to me personally, because the way that I live my life is dependent on events that happened in that space.”



The sun rises on the Kirtland Ohio Temple in Kirtland, Ohio on Saturday, Aug. 26, 2023. | Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News

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Matthew Grow, the managing director of the Church History Department, said the lasting impact of those visitations and temple practices make the Kirtland Temple especially important to the church's Historic Sites program.

"Some of those sites talk primarily about pioneer life or talk about the sacrifice of Latter-day Saints, like at Martin's Cove in Wyoming, or talk about the migration of the Latter-day Saints across the country," he said. "But the most special of our sites, for Latter-day Saints, are where heaven and earth came together in really powerful and tangible and concrete ways."

"So for us those would be sites like the Sacred Grove (where Heavenly Father and Christ appeared to Joseph Smith), sites like the banks of the Susquehanna River (where Peter, James and John appeared to Joseph Smith and another early church leader), and a site like the Kirtland Temple, where in Latter-day Saint theology, Jesus Christ himself appeared, ancient prophets appeared. Those sites where heaven and earth came together, for us continue to be sacred ground."

Will The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints renovate the Kirtland Temple?

The historians said that while they will proceed slowly and cautiously, they also will begin immediately to assess the condition of the temple.

"In the next few months, we'll be working with many structural engineers and architects and spending a lot of hours in that building, trying to understand its history, the changes over time, the condition that it's in," Utt said. "We want to work very systematically and thoughtfully to put together those things that will enable us not only to keep the building standing, but to really make it accessible and available for people to see."

The work will be done with an eye and an ear to preservation.

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"The power of the Kirtland Temple is being in that sacred place and hearing that little creak in the floor, right, and seeing the contribution of individual workers," Utt said. "So we're going to be very careful as we approach stabilizing and preserving that building to really celebrate the things that make it such a special place."

The temple is briefly closed as church historians prepare it with updated signage reflecting the transfer. It will reopen on March 25, six days before Easter.

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The historians said any potential long-term closures for historical restoration and preservation work are years away, and would include listening to the building.

“I think we are too early to even have a timeline of when we would be closing these for renovation,” Utt said. “We want to do this very carefully and very thoughtfully. Good research and good investigation and analysis takes time. So I could imagine us, you know, for the next several years, really, working first to understand the buildings and then putting together schedules and updates and figure out what the building wants us to do with it, almost.”

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The late President M. Russell Ballard, then the acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, looks around the Kirtland Temple in Kirtland, Ohio, on Friday, June 2, 2023.

Grow said preservation work requires answering a lot of questions.

“Are we taking the building back to what it might have looked like on opening day? Or, what about the rest of the history? What moment are you representing?” he said.

For example, historical sources indicate the Kirtland Temple originally had more of a bluish or bluish-gray color. It also had a system of pulleys and curtains for partitioning the assembly halls inside. Should those be restored?

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“There’s lots and lots of questions that we’ll be pondering over the next several years, but no decisions on anything immediately,” Grow said, adding, “I think the white Kirtland Temple is so iconic and beautiful.”

What did the Community of Christ say about the sale of the Kirtland Temple?

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The significance of the temple’s history to Latter-day Saints and the responsibility of maintaining that history in the building weigh heavily on the historians. They repeatedly expressed appreciation that the Community of Christ, which obtained control of the temple between 1860 and 1880, preserved it so well for more than 140 years.

“I am at this point almost overwhelmed with the enormity of the task ahead,” Utt said. “This is one of the most sacred sites in the church and has been so beautifully and carefully cared for by some of the people that I admire most in the world. I am excited at the possibility of helping take this building into its next chapter, but just so grateful for those that have made it possible for us to be able to do this and to preserve this building going forward.”

[The transfer also included 16 buildings in Nauvoo](#), from the Red Brick Store where the international women’s organization known as the Relief Society was organized, to the Joseph and Emma Smith Mansion House, the Nauvoo House and the Smith Family Homestead.

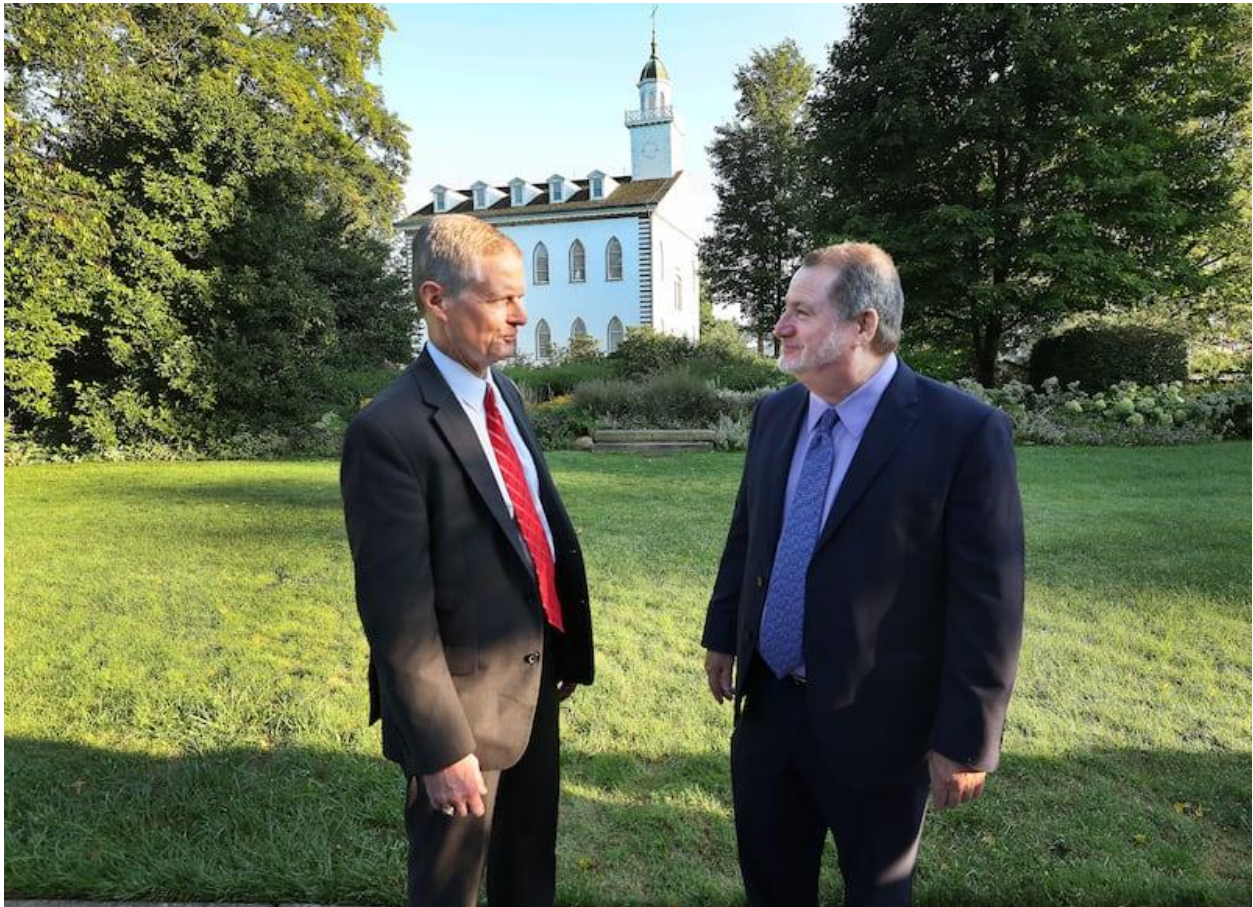
“We’re all excited,” Grow said. “I think we also feel that it’s a sacred trust, to be some of the individuals who will be involved in the governance of these buildings and these documents and these artifacts, and so I think we feel that sacred trust deeply and also feel excited that we’ll be able to, just as Community of Christ has done over the years, preserve these sites and make them accessible to the world.”

Lachlan Mackay, the great-great-great grandson of Joseph Smith, has been a leading caretaker for the Community of Christ for these transferred historic sites. Mackay not only is a Community of Christ apostle and the church’s Historic Sites director, he lived in the shadow of the Kirtland Temple for 15 years and has been living the past 17 years in one of the Nauvoo properties that is changing hands.

He released [a video statement](#) this week about the property transfer. He noted that he met his wife in the Red Brick Store in Nauvoo and was ordained to a priesthood office in the Kirtland Temple. Historians for both churches believe he’s given more tours of the Kirtland Temple than any other person, including one last summer with Elder David A.

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Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



Elder David A. Bednar of Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints talks with Community of Christ Apostle Lachlan Mackay near the Kirtland Ohio Temple in Kirtland, Ohio, on Saturday, Aug. 26, 2023. | Jeffrey D. Allred, Deseret News

“The Nauvoo House, Homestead and Mansion House are my ancestral homes,” Mackay said in the video. “For me, the decision to part with these places has been devastating emotionally. There was a time when I thought it might break me.”

Mackay said that he inherited pragmatism from his great-great grandfather, Joseph Smith III.

“Intellectually, the path forward is clear,” he said. “I care deeply about our past, but I care even more about our future. The post-pandemic world has changed. The needs have never been greater and we no longer have the resources, human or financial, to care for these places the way they deserve to be cared for.”

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Elder McKay, the Latter-day Saint Church Historian and Recorder, said he admired what the Community of Christ had done to preserve the Kirtland Temple and other sites. One example of the care taken for the Kirtland Temple by the Community of Christ is the caution used with the temple's third floor. The COC rarely took tours to the third floor to keep it from wearing down because the floor joists were placed two feet apart, less stable than the ideal.

How will The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints manage tours of the Kirtland Temple?

The Church of Jesus Christ will monitor the flooring and adjust tour group sizes.

“For Latter-day Saints, some of the really sacred things about the Kirtland Temple happened on that top floor, where Joseph Smith sees a vision of the afterlife and sees his brother, Alvin, and his parents,” Grow said. “So our initial intent is to keep the tour groups small, and we feel good about taking small groups to that third-floor space.”

“We’ll have a reservation system for tours, but over time, of course, we will assess whether the building needs going forward.”

Grow said that senior missionaries and young women missionaries will lead most tours.

“About five years ago, the governance of all of the Church History Sites within the church organization passed from the Missionary Department to the Church History Department,” he said. “That was part of an intention to focus more on the history of all of the sites. We still use missionaries, both senior missionaries and young sister missionaries, at all of the sites.”

“Those operations are supervised by professional historians and curators and others. The intention with these new sites was that they would maintain that staffing model of young sisters and senior couples. I would just invite anyone who is suspicious that our sites don’t focus on history to visit the sites.”

Grow and Utt said they expect the strong relationship between historians of both churches to continue. Grow also said the transferred sites will note the Community of Christ’s role.

“As we have written new tours for the sites in Kirtland and Nauvoo, the historic ownership and preservation of sites by Community of Christ will be acknowledged, as well as some of the later history,” Grow said. “The core of those tours will focus on what Latter-day Saints see as the sacred significance of those sites, but not to the exclusion of anything else.”

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Latter-day Saint historians are prepared for the reopenings on March 25.

“Of course, the background discussions have been happening for some while, but it was six weeks ago that we knew that the time had arrived to really plan in a concrete way, to begin to write scripts,” he said.

“We wrote the scripts for three new tours, one tour of the Kirtland Temple, one tour of the (Nauvoo) Red Brick Store, which is tremendously significant for Latter-day Saints as the site of the organization of the Relief Society, site of the first (full) temple endowments, both of which — temple endowment and the Relief Society — are now worldwide phenomena, and then the third tour takes us through the Smith properties in Nauvoo.

“So we’ve done that over the last six-week period, to write new tours, and to prepare new signs, and to make sure we had staffing in place and make sure that we did all of that in a way that our friends in the media did not know prematurely what was going to happen.”

Were any cemeteries included in the Kirtland Temple and Nauvoo property sale?

Some have asked questions about cemeteries in Kirtland and Nauvoo.

The cemetery between the Kirtland Temple and the Joseph and Emma Smith Home in Kirtland is owned by the city and was not part of the transfer, the historians said.

They also said the Smith Family Cemetery in Nauvoo is owned by the Community of Christ and was not included in the transfer.



Tad Walch covers religion with a focus on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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<https://www.deseret.com/faith/2024/03/07/church-plans-for-kirtland-temple-after-purchase/>

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