

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'
LDS Missionaries to Staff Newly
Purchased Kirtland Temple
and Nauvoo Sites.

1

Will History Take a Back Seat to Preaching?

PEGGY FLETCHER STACK

They will be supervised by professional historians and curators, but the narrative at these landmarks is about to change.



(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) A view of the Kirtland Temple and historic cemetery from inside the newly restored home of church founder Joseph Smith and wife Emma Smith in August 2023.

Visitors to historic Kirtland, Ohio, and Nauvoo, Ill., soon may hear a subtly revised narrative about Mormonism's founding years.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

That's because The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints just purchased the landmark Kirtland Temple as well as several significant buildings and documents in Nauvoo for more than [\\$192 million](#) from their longtime owner, the [Community of Christ](#) (formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints).

The latter group, including founder Joseph Smith's wife Emma and her children, remained in the Midwest and cared for these properties while the bulk of the members trekked west with Brigham Young.

The Community of Christ offered a largely historical approach, using docents (many of whom were college interns with a couple of weeks of training), while the Utah-based church plans to employ senior missionary couples and young female, or "sister," missionaries — supervised by professional historians and curators — who may take a more proselytizing (or at least simplified) approach.

[Read more about the [Kirtland Temple and Nauvoo purchases](#).]

The core of these new tours will be "on what Latter-day Saints see as the sacred significance of those sites," [Matthew Grow, managing director of the church's History Department](#), said this week in a news conference, "but not to the exclusion of anything else."

A forgotten faith?



(George Edward Anderson via The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) Visitors in front of the Mansion House in Nauvoo, Ill., in 1907.

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Will future Latter-day Saint guides spend more time talking about all those who lived in the newly acquired Nauvoo Mansion House — including [Jane Manning James](#), one of the faith's first Black converts who traveled west with the pioneers — rather than just the Smith family?

Consider what the two faiths teach about what happened in the Kirtland Temple.

Latter-day Saints believe it was within its walls that, on Easter, April 3, 1836, Jesus appeared alongside the biblical Prophets Moses, Elijah and Elias to Smith and Oliver Cowdery, and, in addition to inaugurating the gathering of Israel, conferred on them the power necessary for “sealing” couples in marriage for eternity.

But the appearance of Jesus and the prophets is not part of the Community of Christ's tradition, according to David Howlett, who wrote a book about [the Kirtland Temple](#).

For him and many other members of the Missouri-based faith, the building's importance is less historical and more personal.

That is why Joseph Johnstun, a Latter-day Saint historian who lives across the Mississippi River from the Illinois city, believes the ownership transfer is “going to change Nauvoo's story.”

An important part of the history “is leaving,” Johnstun said. “We won't have the presence of those who stayed with Emma Smith Bidamon [founder Smith's widow] and her family. They will no longer be personally represented, and the stories they told are in danger of being forgotten.”

Such neglect would be sad not just for them but also for Latter-day Saints, Johnstun says, “because so much of who we are, how we treat history and historic sites, is very much wrapped up with our 'Prairie cousins.'”

Still, according to Latter-day Saint historians, the contributions of these “cousins” will continue to be recognized.

The Community of Christ's “historic ownership and preservation of the sites,” Grow said, “will be acknowledged as well as some of the later history.”

A shared 'love of history'

The sense of excitement and enthusiasm for this purchase among Latter-day Saint leaders, historians and members is palpable.

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“We rejoice at the opportunity to be the steward for these properties going forward,” general authority Seventy [Kyle McKay](#), who serves as church historian and recorder, said at the news conference. “We are so grateful to the Community of Christ for how they cared for these properties and these artifacts over the years.”

Such joint respect has been years in the making.

“There’s a great lesson in the relationship between the two churches,” Grow said, “that once was marked by a lot of animosity, a lot of tension.”

It began to dissipate in the 1960s and '70s, he said, as historians in both faiths explored their “shared heritage.” They exchanged information and analysis about the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible, the important founding events and documents, the significance of the historic buildings and the relationship between the two movements.

Being equally dedicated to the preservation of “that sacred history,” Grow said, “healed old wounds.”

Agonizing choice



(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) A reconstruction of the Red Brick Store in Nauvoo, Ill., owned by Joseph Smith.

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After college, Community of Christ apostle [Lachlan Mackay](#) — a direct descendant of his faith's first president, Joseph Smith III, a son of Joseph and Emma, and “fell in love” with the story of his church.

He became the director of the Kirtland Temple historical society and lived literally in the “shadow of the temple” for years. He was ordained as a priesthood “teacher” in that sacred space.

Mackay moved to Nauvoo in 2007 and has lived there — indeed, in one of the homes that now belongs to the LDS Church — ever since.

“These places have been my home for nearly my entire adult life,” the apostle said in a short [YouTube video](#). “I met my wife in the Red Brick Store...I have almost certainly given more tours of the Kirtland Temple than any living person.”



(Val Brinkerhoff via The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) The Red Brick Store in Nauvoo, Ill. The church's women's group, the Relief Society, was established here in 1842.

For him, the decision to part with these places has been “devastating emotionally,” he explained. “For a time, I thought it might break me.”

But he inherited his famous ancestor's pragmatism, Mackay said. “Intellectually, the path is clear.” He cares deeply about the faith's past but “even more about our future.”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

His church, with its 250,000 members, no longer has the resources to care for these properties the way they deserve is confident the entire Smith family would feel good about this sale.

“Amid my grief,” Mackay said, “so do I.”

A cache of documents

6



(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) Included in the stash of historical buildings, artifacts and documents the Latter-day Saint Church purchased from Community Christ are portraits, attributed to David Rogers, of the faith's founder, Joseph Smith, and his wife Emma.

All of the documents that the Salt Lake City-headquartered church acquired in this deal are well known to scholars with the [Joseph Smith Papers](#) project, Grow said, but it is good to have the physical pages.

The most important ones, he said, deal with the church's scriptures, including Smith's revisions of the Bible (known as the Joseph Smith Translation).

For the historian, though, the handwritten letters between Smith and the faith's first first lady are particularly poignant.

“Joseph is writing letters at times of extreme duress,” Grow explained. “He's apart from Emma, so one of the letters is the first time he visits New York City, and he's just kind of

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overwhelmed by this big metropolis that he's in. Another of the letters is when he's on the [Camp of Israel or Zion's Camp](#) expedition at the time of a lot of drama and stress. Another two letters are from [Liberty Jail](#) and [Richmond Jail](#). Two of the letters are in the final few days of his life, written from Carthage," [where Joseph and his brother Hyrum were gunned down](#).

Holy but public

While the Community of Christ owned the Kirtland Temple, it allowed many groups to use it for services, speeches, meetings and memory-making, including gatherings by the [Sunstone Education Foundation](#), [Affirmation](#) for LGBTQ Latter-day Saints, the [Mormon History Association](#), and an assembly of academics.

[Warner Woodworth](#), emeritus professor of organizational behavior at church-owned Brigham Young University, once spoke to the Communal Studies Association from the temple pulpit where Joseph Smith had preached.



(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) The interior of the Kirtland Temple in Kirtland, Ohio.

"I was able to enlighten the huge audience about not only Mormon history but specifically about Joseph Smith's teaching regarding social justice through implementing the United Order," Woodworth wrote on Facebook, adding that he then had a private

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tour with a Community of Christ guide and time to meditate in the holy space. "It was a sacred experience."

Will the 17 million-member LDS Church continue to allow such public access?

At least for 15 years, according to an FAQ about the purchase deal on the [Community of Christ website](#).

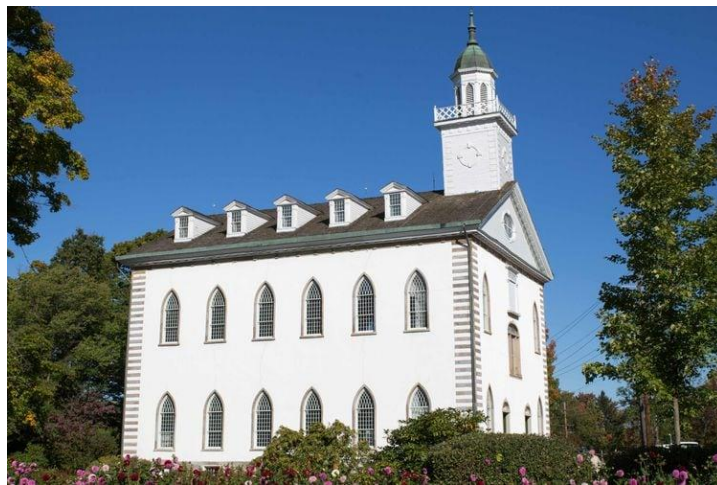
"Beyond the contractual agreement," it stated, "we have received confirmation of the intention of [Latter-day Saint leaders] that they plan to continue to make these sites available to the public at no charge."

Under the deal, Community of Christ groups also will be able to stage up to six meetings or gatherings a year in the Kirtland and Nauvoo buildings.

Groups interested in using the site will have to "enter into discussions" with the church "to make sure that the use would be appropriate," Grow said. "For instance, at the St. George Tabernacle that we operate with the church History Department, it's open to many different types of community groups and organizations and lectures and things like that."

Certainly, he said, "the Kirtland Temple is a very sacred, special site. We would want to maintain it that way."

Open to revelation?



(The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) The Kirtland Temple in Kirtland, Ohio.

One aspect of that temple that will soon open to the public is the third floor, which has been closed for some time.

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“Some of the really sacred things about the Kirtland Temple happened on that top floor,” Grow said. “It was where Joseph Smith sees a vision of the afterlife and sees his [deceased] brother, Alvin, and his parents. ... We feel good about taking small groups to that third-floor space. And because of this, we’ll have a reservation system for tours.”

The space holds particular meaning to [Emily Utt, a Latter-day Saint curator of historic sites](#). She studied in Cleveland and went often to the temple.

“The ability that I have to go to the temple and make covenants and live a holy life is because of the Kirtland Temple,” Utt said in the virtual news conference. “It is significant to all of us who live, but it is significant to me personally, because the way that I live my life is dependent on events that happened in that space.”

Many of the church’s historic sites celebrate pioneer life and culture, Grow said, but the “most special” locations are those like the [Sacred Grove in New York](#), where members believe Smith saw God and Christ, and the Kirtland Temple.

“Those sites are where heaven and earth came together,” he said, and which “for us, continue to be sacred ground.”



Peggy Fletcher Stack is Senior Religion Writer for *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Hired in 1991 to cover Utah's various faiths, particularly Mormonism, Peggy has talked forgiveness with Archbishop Desmond Tutu, nearly fainted waiting for the Dalai Lama, fasted with Muslims during Ramadan — and has reported on 50 consecutive semiannual LDS General Conferences.

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<https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2024/03/06/new-lds-mission-kirtland-nauvoo/>

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