

TOM GREEN, A PROMINENT
MORMON FUNDAMENTALIST,
WITH HIS FIVE WIVES AND
35 CHILDREN IN UTAH, 2001



DON'T JUDGE A MORMON BY THIS PICTURE

The Mormon faith has been plagued by stereotyping for decades. Lizzie Pook investigates one of the world's fastest growing religions...

What does one wear to go to church with a Mormon? I have no idea. And it's a very real quandary considering I'm going to do just that in about 30 minutes. 'I'll Google it', I think, drumming the query "What do Mormons wear to church?" into my iPad. Answers range from "Sunday best" to "white ceremonial robes". I haven't got time for robes, so I grab my phone and text Jacqui.

Jacqui is a kindly sixty-something northerner and, more importantly for the purpose of this piece, a Mormon. She's agreed to escort me to a worship service in the small cathedral city of Salisbury. The service – as I find out later – is pretty similar to any other church service (save for the unrecognisable hymns, arguably 'unusual' doctrines and lack of ceremonial wine). Jacqui pings back an answer: "Ladies are counselled not to wear trousers". I grab a grey dress from my wardrobe.

Mormonism is *everywhere* at the moment, thanks in part to *The Book Of Mormon*, the stratospherically successful and biting satirical Broadway musical masterminded by *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone. Following Elder Cunningham and Elder Price, two Mormon missionaries, the show lampoons issues that would make the most thick-skinned Mormon cringe: blind faith, sexualised baptism rituals and what Parker and Stone call "Star Wars" existentialism – an attack on the Mormon belief that earth is just one of many inhabited worlds. After winning nine Tony Awards and taking in over \$144m (£92m) at the US box office, it opens in the UK this month.

It's easy to see how this came to pass; Mormons have been depicted stereotypically on our screens for years in shows like HBO drama *Big Love* and *Sister Wives* (a *Gypsy Weddings*-type documentary about polygamy). Mitt Romney, former US presidential candidate, tried

to be discreet about his Mormon faith during his 2012 campaign but reports still mocked his 'magic underwear' (a reference to the sacred white garments Mormons receive when they visit temple). After Romney lost the election, Philip Barlow, chair of Mormon history and culture at Utah State University said, "The world could see that a Mormon who runs for office isn't, by definition, a nut case."

Indeed, a lot of confusion and myth surrounds Mormons (many friends thought I was researching the Amish). Say "Mormon" in a word-association game and chances are the next word will be "polygamy" because, for many of us, that's what we associate the faith with.

In actual fact, Mormons, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS church), are Christians. They accept *The Bible* but also believe *The Book Of Mormon*, a modern-day re-telling of the New Testament written by American Joseph Smith in the 1820s after he claimed to have received visions from God. Smith set up the LDS church in upstate New York but, after his death, the Mormons followed new prophet Brigham Young to Utah which remains, to this day, the centre of Mormon cultural influence.

And they've stayed faithful to some old-fashioned principles. They are *extremely* family-focused and hold 'family home evenings' every week. They follow a strict health code which eschews alcohol, tobacco, coffee, tea and any other addictive substances and they observe strict rules of chastity outside marriage and strict fidelity inside marriage – every Mormon will be quick to remind you that polygamy has been outlawed in the LDS church for more than a century (although it is still practised in pockets of America by fundamentalist groups).

But I want to see the reality behind the satire, to witness first-hand a religion that, while undergoing ridicule, is also reaching unparalleled heights of popularity – Mormonism is one of the world's fastest growing



religions. Yes, on paper they hold some leftfield beliefs. For example, while they believe in heaven, hell and eternal life, they also hold to the idea that before they came to earth they lived in heaven as the spirit children of God. Some even believe (although this is disputed by *many* Mormons) that when they die, they'll return to heaven as spirits and will eventually populate their own 'celestial' planet. And it's beliefs like *these* that Parker and Stone so gleefully parody.

GOING TO THE CHAPEL

It's 2pm on a Thursday. I'm standing next to an enormous statue of Jesus at Hyde Park Chapel in London, waiting to meet Mission President Jordan, the man in charge of all the Mormon missionaries in London and the South East. I'm escorted through the foyer and up the stairs to his

“AS SOON AS SOMEONE KNOWS YOU’RE A MORMON, THEY WATCH EVERYTHING THAT YOU DO WITH A MAGNIFYING GLASS”

office. President Jordan turns out to be a wonderfully charming all-American ex-barrister with a Donny Osmond haircut and immaculately pressed suit. He's very well-groomed. Afterwards, I look in my notebook and see I've written the words "amazingly white teeth" and underlined them vigorously.

The walls are covered with passport-sized photos of every missionary serving within a 100-mile radius. President Jordan is keen to demonstrate their ethnic diversity, so he



begins to read the names off the board. "Elder Fernandez from Brazil, Elder Tam from Hong Kong, Sister Galang from the Philippines..." I smile and nod to show I have appreciated the variety. I notice something else: a poster affixed neatly on a whiteboard which reads "The Mormons Are Coming". It's an advert for Parker and Stone's musical and surely an horrific anomaly in the office of one of the most influential Mormons in London. "Some are uncomfortable that it's a parody with a degree of ridicule," he

Elder Coppin, the man in charge of public affairs for the entire LDS church, is a rotund, jovial fellow from Utah who refers to missionaries as "kids" and "gals". He has arranged for me to go proselytising (spreading the word of God) with two sister missionaries in South Kensington. Instead of knocking on doors, we will be performing 'street contact', where we'll, quite literally, approach people in the street and tell them about the *Book Of Mormon*.

Sister Wuthrich and Sister Karyan seem nervous but pleased to meet me. They're young – 21 and 20 – and both prime examples of the 'Mormon glow' (every member of the church I've met looks *extremely* healthy, bright-eyed and younger than their years). They put it down to the

presence of God, but it's surely got something to do with the clean-living lifestyle.

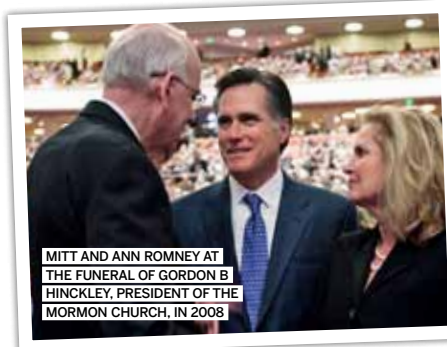
We make our way through the chapel and head outside. "Don't leave Lizzie on her own or she might fall into a baptismal font!" jokes Elder Coppin. But he practises exactly what he preaches. He's rarely far from my side; slapping a Dictaphone in front of me to ensure they're not misquoted. I'm baffled as to what he thinks I'm going to do.

On the street the sisters are unassuming, non-aggressive, but eager in their approach. They launch straight into strangers with questions: "How do you find happiness in life?" "What brings you peace?" It's surprisingly effective. Out of the 15 or so people that the sisters approach, seven stop and have an actual discussion – the others politely decline. Not one person is rude.

Two of those who do stop and chat are students from a nearby university. "Do you have a religion?" the missionaries ask. One is a Christian and the other is a Muslim. Thus begins a discussion about praying, *The Bible* and the girls' native Africa. Eventually, the group exchange numbers and agree to meet up to discuss *The Book Of Mormon*. I'm surprised at how 'easy' it all is.

As I look up I see Elder Coppin peering at us, sleuth-style, from behind a lamp-post. I ask him about his over-zealous media monitoring later and whether he felt odd lurking in the background. "I know," he says. "I feel like the Gestapo!"

There's a scene in *The Book Of Mormon* musical where Elder Price has a nightmare about hell. In his dream, hell is filled with Hitler, Genghis Khan and a troupe of dancing coffee cups (Mormons



☞ don't drink coffee). So where else should I arrange to meet Corrine – a leather-jacket wearing 33-year-old university lecturer, mother of one and Mormon – but at Starbucks? It's 20 minutes into our conversation before the stupidity of this dawns on me. "I can't believe I brought you here!" I splutter. She's extremely gracious about it: "I've just come from the pub. You're OK".

A WOMAN'S WORK

Corrine is not what I expected. I was imagining a conservatively dressed housewife. "I try not to advertise my religion," she explains. "As soon as someone knows you're a Mormon, they watch everything that you do with a magnifying glass." Statistically, Mormon women are twice as likely to describe themselves as housewives. And, the "ultimate goal" for women in the LDS church, members tell me, is to be a homemaker. "Being someone who contributes to society through work is something we see as important," says Corrine, who is a graphic designer and business lecturer at Kingston University. "But the majority of Mormon women, especially in America, will be married by their early 20s."

Is this partly because of the pressure to preserve their chastity? I wonder if Corrine feels 'odd' because she's part of a small minority of UK women who have only slept with one partner. "I wouldn't say chastity is an easy, natural thing. I have regrets about guys I've kissed, but the only person in the world that will ever totally know all of me is my husband [who Corrine met at church], and vice versa. It's awesome."

Our talk of chastity gets me thinking about the main thing that

haunts the Mormon community and arguably tarnishes their reputation: polygamy. It's not practised by the LDS church anymore (since 1904, any member practising or openly advocating polygamy is excommunicated) but I'm keen to speak to someone who's had experience of the fundamentalist part of the Mormon faith in the US. Joanne Hanks, 52, was part of a polygamist Mormon family in Manti, Utah, and a member of a splinter

"WE THINK WHAT THEY BELIEVE IS REALLY, REALLY RIDICULOUS AND YET THEY SEEM LIKE PRETTY HAPPY PEOPLE"

group called The True And Living Church Of Jesus Christ Of Saints Of The Last Days (TLC). "My husband, Jeff, and I joined the TLC in 1997," she tells me over the phone, explaining that after getting wrapped up in Mormon last-day prophecies (fundamentalists believed Christ would return to the earth and initiate an apocalypse at the close of the last millennium) they moved to the 'chosen' rural town of Manti, Utah where one man, Jim Harmston, had taken on the role of the 'prophet'.

"With hindsight, I can see that everything he taught us – from government conspiracies to the fact that he was the reincarnation of the Holy Ghost – was ridiculous," says Joanne. "But plural marriage was the hardest thing to get our heads around. We were told we'd have to prove ourselves to God (who was a polygamist himself) by living a polygamist lifestyle. It was difficult to adjust to Judith, Jeff's first plural wife, joining the family. She was only 17. I felt threatened. But the idea of

sharing Jeff and helping her have an amazing husband made me feel like I was doing something good. Jeff and Judith got married and went on honeymoon. Waiting for the news that they'd consummated their marriage was tough."

Joanne's husband Jeff went on to have three wives, which was actually on the low side for members of the TLC. "Some of the others, including Jim, had at least 12 wives," explains Joanne. "Jeff would take it in turns to


sleep with each of us every night; we thought that was the fairest way. But one man we knew had four wives and would choose every evening which wife he wanted to take to bed, to keep them on their toes – it was all about power and manipulation."

After seven years in the TLC, the couple's belief started to wear thin; especially since Jesus had *not* shown up at the millennium. Disillusioned, scared and worrying for their daughters' future, Joanne and Jeff packed up their car and drove away.

BELIEF SYSTEM

There is a darker side to the Mormon religion, but from what I can tell this extends only to those with fundamental beliefs, arguably just as you'd get with other religions. For the most part I'm impressed by what I've seen of the Mormons. Those I've met have been kind-hearted, warm and open to my questions. Their humanitarian work (many missionaries do charity work and the church funds international aid)

is admirable. And their strength of belief is a force to be reckoned with. But I also think that some of their views are ludicrous. The existentialism and the evangelistic fervour all seem odd to me (and don't even get me started on the practise of 'baptism by proxy' by which they claim to have posthumously introduced everyone from Princess Diana to the 9/11 victims into the LDS to ensure their spirits go to heaven). However, I also have huge respect for how graciously they're taking their public pummelling by Parker and Stone. Though the writers themselves don't see it as a battering. "We love the goofiness of Mormon stories," claims Parker. "Some of them are incredulous, and we loved almost all the Mormons we had ever met. So there was sort of this conundrum that we like to talk about – we think what they believe is really, really ridiculous and yet they seem like pretty happy people."

And it seems most Mormons agree. "It's vulgar juvenile humour, but it masks a very sophisticated take on the value of faith in the 21st century," says Joanna Brooks, an American Mormon who's seen the musical. "It questions why someone should believe and have faith. And the answer is that faith can motivate goodness. So there's no shame in believing things others find preposterous." The Mormons see being parodied not only as a test of faith, but also as a chance to spread their message. When *The Book Of Mormon* opens, I'll be in the front row. Probably in the seat  next to President Jordan.

***The Book Of Mormon*; from 25 February; Prince of Wales Theatre, Coventry Street, London W1; from £20; bookofmormonlondon.com**

THE BOOK

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

1 The movement was founded in the 1820s by Joseph Smith who said God directed him to a buried book about an ancient civilization, which he turned into *The Book of Mormon*.

2 Mormons eschew alcoholic drinks, drugs, tobacco, coffee, tea and other potentially addictive substances.

3 They observe chastity outside marriage and fidelity in marriage. Same-sex marriages aren't allowed.

4 Every Monday, families eat, pray and play games together – no TV allowed.

5 Most Mormons study scriptures and pray

OF MORMON

Saints follows a strict set of rules and regulations

daily. They believe in *The Bible*, but that *The Book Of Mormon* is a restoration of the beliefs of the early Christian church.

6 Many Mormons give 10% of their earnings to the church as 'tithing'. This is used to upkeep the church, fund humanitarian work or help poorer members of the community.

7 The church is led by 'president' Thomas S Monson. Mormons believe he has a direct line to God. He is supported by 12 living apostles, all based in Utah.

8 They believe that they were spirit children of God in heaven before they came to earth. Once they die they will return as 'priests' and 'priestesses'.