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An Analysis of the Financial Incentives in Attacking the Restoration

Ron C. Rhodes

Abstract: *With the popularity of social media growing exponentially, prominent critics of the Church are leveraging the platforms, particularly YouTube, as a key resource to produce thousands of negative videos about the Church. The accusations made in the videos about Church history, leadership, doctrine, and culture are so numerous that it could take months or even years to research fully, all while the flood of new content continues. It is easy for those exposed to the accusations to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume and, therefore, assume at least some of it must be true. This could place at least some members on a path to a faith crisis. While many members understand the need to seek information from reliable sources to cope with such accusations, for some it may also be of value to consider the financial incentives for the extensive hostile content being created. In this paper the business models and apparent revenue of several influential organizations are considered, which may help explain why the content, especially video content, is being produced in such volume. Financial incentives, of course, do not necessarily call a work into question but can be of interest in seeking to understand behaviors and the relationship between business models and organizational output and success.*

Prominent critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints produce thousands of videos that disseminate misinformation via social media, targeting the Church's history and doctrine. Their goal is to persuade viewers that the Church is fundamentally flawed and has been dishonest for generations. Conversely, there are apologetic

entities aligned with the Church that counteract the misinformation and offer substantiated responses to these allegations, which critics generally respond to with additional criticism. This paper does not aim to reevaluate these arguments but instead focuses on analyzing the motivations of the critics, supported by data, and the strategies they employ to foster revenue growth. While financial incentives do not necessarily call into question the validity of an argument—many important sources of information naturally require paid employees—financial motivations may be relevant in evaluating problematic behavior such as producing extensive questionable material that demonstrates strong contempt for the Church.

The Numbers

A recent financial analysis of the primary critics of the Church, namely, *Mormon Stories*¹ and *Mormon Discussions*,² has brought to light some concerning statistics: their YouTube channels alone have a combined total of over 4,200 videos, with 96,000,000 views between them.³ These statistics don't include Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or any other social media platform. A significant percentage of their video content takes a negative stance toward the Church, delving into aspects such as Church history, leadership, and doctrine. Many videos feature interviews with guests who are antagonistic toward the Church, contributing to the false narrative that the Church is inherently deceptive and has been lying to them all along.

Unfortunately, these videos are having an impact, as more people

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1. *Mormon Stories* is the name of a podcast hosted by John Dehlin. The name used for *Mormon Stories* varies from platform to platform. For instance, on its website, it is simply "Mormon Stories," but on YouTube it is "Mormon Stories Podcast." *Mormon Stories* has, over the years, been characterized as a "service" of the Open Stories Foundation. In this paper any references to *Mormon Stories* or the Open Stories Foundation should be understood as referring to any of these organizations having their roots in the efforts of John Dehlin.
 2. *Mormon Discussion, Inc.*, exhibits many of the same imprecision issues evident in *Mormon Stories*. *Mormon Discussion, Inc.*, is variously referred to online as "Mormon Discussion," "Mormon Discussions," "Mormon Discussion, Inc.," and "Mormon Discussion Inc." In this paper, for the sake of simplicity and consistency, I will refer to "Mormon Discussions," which includes any variation of the organization created by Bill Reel.
 3. *Mormon Stories* YouTube channel, youtube.com/mormonstories, (comprising 1,868 videos with 90,000,000 views as of 12 February 2024), and *Mormon Discussions* YouTube channel, youtube.com/@MormonDiscussion/featured, (comprising 2,353 videos with 6,200,000 views as of 12 February 2024).

are stepping away from the Church. While critics tend to overstate the exodus of members over these issues, Elder Marlin K. Jensen confirmed this is a valid concern among the Church's senior leadership. When asked if the General Authorities are aware that people are leaving the Church because of the information critics provide, he responded, "They really do know. And they really care. And they realize that, maybe, since Kirtland, we've never had a period of—I'll call it apostasy—like we're having right now, largely over these issues."⁴

As of 2023, more than one-quarter of the world's population (over 2.7 billion users) turn to YouTube every month. More than 122 million people access YouTube daily.⁵ A 2021 report stated that the "YouTube platform is the second largest search engine and second most visited site in the world following Google."⁶ There can be little doubt that members of the Church are among those who rely upon YouTube as a search engine. Unfortunately, if a member of the Church who is experiencing doubts attempts to research critics' accusations by performing a search on YouTube, they will likely see large volumes of even more negative accusations, inadvertently adding to their doubts.

Both Mormon Stories and Mormon Discussions have invested extensive time and resources to generate thousands of videos. Even a cursory review of their YouTube channels and websites reveals aggressive solicitation tactics and fundraisers.⁷ Both of these organizations have been established as nonprofit entities and, by law, a nonprofit in their category is required to disclose their revenue and salaries as public records,⁸ making it possible to research their financial

4. Stephen Smoot, "Reports of the Death of the Church are Greatly Exaggerated," *FairMormon Blog*, 15 January 2013, fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2013/01/15/reports-of-the-death-of-the-church-are-greatly-exaggerated.

5. "YouTube Statistics 2024," *Global Media Insight* (blog), 1 February 2024, globalmediainsight.com/blog/youtube-users-statistics/.

6. Adnan Veysel Ertemel and Ahmad Ammoura, "Is YouTube a Search Engine or a Social Network? Analyzing Evaluative Inconsistencies," *Business and Economics Research Journal* 12, no. 4 (2021): 871, researchgate.net/publication/355479653_Is_YouTube_a_Search_Engine_or_a_Social_Network_Analyzing_Evaluative_Inconsistencies.

7. The Mormon Stories website has four invitations to donate on their home page, mormonstories.org. Also see Ron Rhodes, "Mormon Discussion, Inc.," *Answering Latter-day Saint Critics* (website), answeringldscritics.com/mormon-discussion-inc

8. "Exempt Organization Public Disclosure and Availability Requirements," IRS.gov, 4 December 2023, irs.gov/charities-non-profits/exempt-organization-public-disclosure-and-availability-requirements.

records. An examination of the financial records of these two organizations reveals a concerning picture.

According to IRS records, the leading organization critical of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mormon Stories, reported earnings in donations of \$751,928 in 2021 and \$738,478 in 2022.⁹ This organization experienced an average annual revenue growth rate of 23.9 percent over the previous eight years.¹⁰ Using this average growth rate, its estimated revenue for 2023 is \$907,589. Mormon Discussions reported revenue to the IRS of \$327,345 in 2022.¹¹ Its growth rate since 2019 was 60.2 percent, and in fact, its revenue more than doubled from 2020 to 2021.¹²

While the “nonprofit” label implies that no one personally profits from donations or proceeds, the board of directors of such an entity may grant the CEO salary increases at their discretion. In 2022, the CEO of Mormon Stories received a salary of \$228,674,¹³ about 31 percent of its overall revenue. This was not a part-time endeavor; he dedicated himself full-time to this role.¹⁴ Over the past eight years, he has received an average salary increase of 13.6 percent, but as high as an 84.5 percent increase from 2017 to 2018. Using the average of 13.6 percent, we can project his 2023 salary at \$259,775 — providing a strong financial incentive to continue doing the same work.

The CEO of Mormon Discussions drew a salary in 2023 of

9. Andrea Suozzo et al., “Open Stories Foundation: Mormon Stories,” *Nonprofit Explorer*, ProPublica.com, 24 April 2024 (includes tax years from 2010 through 2022), projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/272026793.

10. Suozzo et al., “Open Stories Foundation: Mormon Stories.”

11. Mormon Discussions 2022 tax return (IRS Form 990, Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax), mormondiscussionpodcast.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/06/MD-12-31-22-Amended-Form-990-Final.pdf, also available at “Non-Profit Financials,” MormonDiscussions.org, mormondiscussionpodcast.org/non-profit-financials/.

12. Numbers based on comparison of IRS tax documents from 2019, 2020, and 2021, all available at “Non-Profit Financials,” MormonDiscussions.org, mormondiscussionpodcast.org/non-profit-financials/. The compound annual growth rate (CAGR) is calculated based on compound growth from 2019 (\$79,682) to 2022 (\$327,345): $\text{yearly growth} = e^{(\ln(327345/79682)/3)} - 1 = 0.6016$, or 60.2 percent.

13. Suozzo et al., “Open Stories Foundation: Mormon Stories.”

14. Suozzo et al., “Open Stories Foundation: Mormon Stories.” The filings for each year show that John Dehlin reported the average hours worked per week as 40 hours (2018, 2020), 50 hours (2010–2017), 60 hours (2019), and most recently 70 hours (2021, 2022).

\$100,000, as reported on its website.¹⁵ This nonprofit organization is much newer than Mormon Stories but is producing videos at an accelerated rate. At the time of this writing, it has as many videos as Mormon Stories, all of which solicit donations. Like Mormon Stories, its rapid growth in revenue is directly related to the number of videos produced.¹⁶ The CEO of Mormon Discussions started full-time in January 2023, and although his salary is currently lower than that of the Mormon Stories CEO, it will likely increase at a similar pace as the revenue of Mormon Discussions grows in the future.

The Business Model

The business model of such critics appears to include three primary sources of revenue. Their largest source is donations that they actively solicit on their social media channels and websites. Logically, those who donate to critical organizations are those who agree with the information in their videos, have lost their faith, or at least feel some degree of animosity toward the Church. Therefore, it is in the critics' best financial interest to cause doubt and broaden the population of potential donors by flooding social media with thousands of negative videos that include a large variety of issues (the "Big List" technique).¹⁷

The second largest source of revenue is from social media platforms that pay content creators based on the number of views of their content. Based on information from "Influencer Marketing Hub," a YouTube channel averages around \$0.018 for each view. While that doesn't seem significant, Mormon Stories has 90,500,000 views, which is \$1,629,000 across several years of videos. The 2022 tax returns for Mormon Stories include \$160,208 in content revenue, which is about 21 percent of its total revenue. Mormon Discussions does not currently break out its view revenue from contributions.

The third largest source of revenue is to provide fee-based services that cater to those individuals who have been impacted by the negative information, including offering additional videos to the community,

15. "Non-Profit Financials," Mormon Discussions (website), mormondiscussionpodcast.org/non-profit-financials/.

16. Ron Rhodes, "Mormon Stories Podcast: Exploiting Members of the Church—For Money," Answering LDS Critics (website), answeringldscritics.com/mormon-stories-podcast.

17. Jeff Lindsay, "Coping with the 'Big List' of Attacks on the LDS Faith," *FairMormon Blog*, 20 May 2014, fairlatterdaysaints.org/blog/2014/05/20/coping-with-the-big-list-of-attacks-on-the-lds-faith.

seminars/conferences, one-on-one coaching, and, in many cases, selling post-Mormon products.¹⁸ These services are offered on their respective websites, and while the fees are listed, the overall revenue they generate is not provided on tax documents. It is evident, however, that prominent critics are profiting in multiple ways from the doubt and lost faith of Church members. Indeed, the more faith they shake, the more money they make.

Not all critics follow this business model and therefore do not necessarily realize the same revenue increases. One such entity, Mormonism Research Ministry, is a nonprofit organization that relies on donations. In 2021, its revenue was \$233,654, but its average growth rate since 2013 was 4.75 percent.¹⁹ While Mormonism Research Ministries does have a YouTube channel, it has only published two videos since their channel's inception in 2014, so clearly, it is not following the same business model. Without the videos to cultivate and expand doubt and solicit donations, its revenue remains comparatively stagnant.

As another example, the CES Letter Foundation was also established as a nonprofit entity. The *CES Letter* combines dozens of accusations about the Church into one document. The damage done by the *CES Letter* to some members' faith is incalculable, mainly because those accusations are disseminated far and wide by other prominent critics who consistently publish *CES Letter* content in their videos. The accusations in the *CES Letter* have been effectively addressed by a variety of members, including Steven Smoot,²⁰ Daniel Peterson,²¹ Brian Hales,²² Michael Ash,²³ Jeff Lindsay,²⁴ and several others. But,

18. Ron Rhodes, "The LDS Critics Business Model," Answering LDS Critics (website), answeringldscritics.com/lds-critics.

19. Andrea Suozzo, et al., "Mormonism Research Ministry," Nonprofit Explorer, ProPublica.com, 24 April 2024 (includes tax years from 2001 through 2022), projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/953560041.

20. Steven Smoot, "CES Letter Author Jeremy Runnells to Face Disciplinary Action: The Non-Scandal," *Ploni Almoni* (blog), 12 February 2016, plonialmoni.mormon.com/2016/02/ces-letter-author-jeremy-runnells-to.html.

21. Daniel Peterson, "Some Reflections on that Letter to a CES Director," (lecture, 2014 FairMormon Conference, Provo, UT, 8 August 2014), fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2014/reflections-letter-ces-director.

22. Brian Hales, "Jeremy Runnells—The New Expert on Joseph Smith's Polygamy?," Rational Faiths (website), 15 July 2014, rationalfaiths.com/jeremy-runnells-new-expert-joseph-smiths-polygamy/.

23. Michael R. Ash, "Bamboozled by the 'CES Letter,'" Shaken Faith Syndrome (website), January 2015, shakenfaithsyndrome.com/bamboozle/bamboozled.pdf.

24. Lindsay, "Coping with the 'Big List.'"

even so, the CES Letter Foundation never developed a YouTube channel or made other social media videos. Therefore, according to the IRS, its revenue was less than \$50,000 from 2015 to 2019. Further, as of this writing, its nonprofit status seems to have been revoked, as shown in Figure 1.²⁵ It is possible, of course, that this problem is due to a mistake by the IRS or has been resolved and is not yet recorded on the website. The CES Letter Foundation's website continues to state that it is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.²⁶

IRS SEARCH | HELP

CES LETTER FOUNDATION

EIN: 47-4179614 | Las Vegas, Nevada, United States

Auto-Revocation List

Organizations whose federal tax exempt status was automatically revoked for not filing a Form 990-series return or notice for three consecutive years. *Important note: Just because an organization appears on this list, it does not mean the organization is currently revoked, as they may have been reinstated.*

Exemption Type: 501(c)(3) ⓘ

Exemption Reinstatement Date:

Revocation Date: 05-15-2023

Revocation Posting Date: 08-14-2023

Figure 1. Screenshot showing the apparent revocation of the tax-exempt status of the CES Letter Foundation. If this is correct, it has yet to be acknowledged by the CES Letter Foundation on their website.

We are not aware of any announcement from the CES Letter Foundation acknowledging that the tax-exempt status has been or

25. Tax Exempt Organization Search, apps.irs.gov/app/eos/. The site provides a place to search for an organization EIN (47-4179614). You can then click on the results (CES Letter Foundation) and see the revocation information.

26. Their homepage as of 6 May 2024 declares that "CES Letter Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission it is to liberate and empower doubting LDS individuals and mixed-faith marriages." Their donation page also asserts that they are "a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization," cesletter.org/donate/.

ever was revoked, as might be expected in order to inform donors that their contribution may not be tax deductible. In any case, while the *CES Letter* continues to significantly impact members because the information in the letter continues to be recycled in prominent critics' videos, the CES Letter Foundation itself may have struggled, possibly because it did not follow the same business model.

The data suggest that the publication of large quantities of negative videos is a key component of a business model for leading organizations focused on criticizing the Church. Such videos may have a strong influence on revenue. Given the financial success of entities that have proven this model, we are starting to see others follow suit.²⁷ And, because of their financial success, we can expect to see already prominent critics become more aggressive in their marketing efforts to advance their message to even more members of the Church. Mormon Stories has even purchased billboards that direct people to its channels.²⁸

Comparison to Entities that Defend the Church

There is an important comparison between nonprofit organizations that are critical of the Church, and nonprofit organizations established to defend the Church. Many view those defending the Church as heroic, giving their time, talents, and knowledge to provide solid fact-based answers to the hundreds of accusations leveled by critics. But when responding to this comparison of salaries, some critics have ridiculed individuals who volunteer for these organizations, resorting to name-calling and implying that working without monetary compensation was somehow laughable.²⁹ Again, an information outlet with significant financial gains for its leaders is not necessarily unreliable because of such incentives, nor is information created by unpaid volunteers necessarily more trustworthy. Financial incentives are nevertheless a factor that may be considered in understanding the

27. Carah Burrell (host), "Big Announcement Time!" Nuancehoe YouTube Channel, 30 August 2023, youtube.com/watch?v=OMr7rfvXyy0&t=1s, at 1:45.

28. John Dehlin, "Mormon Stories Billboard Campaign," Mormon Stories (website), 17 January 2019, mormonstories.org/billboard/.

29. Ron Rhodes, "Comparison to Faithful Foundations," Answering LDS Critics (website), answeringldscritics.com/comparison-to-faithful-foundations; Ron Rhodes, "LDS Critics are Proud to Take Your Money in Exchange for Faith Loss," YouTube channel, 17 August 2023, youtube.com/watch?v=8gMFBE dZWx8&t=83s at 0:27.

behavior, and especially the business model and marketing methods, of the source. Further, when information is known to be hostile and unreliable, the financial incentives may strengthen or confirm suspicions of questionable behavior.

Contempt for the Church

Producing an extensive number of videos intended to destroy faith in order to more successfully solicit Church members or others for money would be concerning enough if it were the sole activity of these prominent critics. But the combination of their significant financial motivation along with a clear demonstration of contempt toward the Church and its members may raise reasonable questions about the fairness and reliability of the information. The contempt they demonstrate may be manifest in actions such as the following:

- Selling merchandise — including hats, mugs, and t-shirts — that mock our views on God and Jesus Christ, or denigrates the sacred temple ceremony, including the tokens of the Holy Priesthood.³⁰
- Interviewing guests who have recorded the temple ceremony and published it on YouTube.³¹
- Interviewing guests who made verbal threats of violence against President Dallin H. Oaks.³²
- Publicly touting the benefits of illegal drug use.³³

Part of the mission statement of Mormon Stories is to “promote healing, growth, and community for those who choose to leave the LDS Church.”³⁴ The mission statement for Mormon Discussions is to “provide people tools and resources to understand and process one’s journey and doubts within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

30. Exmo Apparel (website), exmoshirts.com/collections/atheist and exmoshirts.com/collections/temple.

31. “By Their Fruits: John Dehlin, Bill Reel, RFM, Nuance Hoe, Zelfh On A Shelf and more,” Thoughtful Faith YouTube Channel, 15 June 2023, youtube.com/watch?v=rXuAyJ1Qw1o&t=668s at 1:30.

32. “By Their Fruits,” at 9:40.

33. “By Their Fruits,” at 10:16.

34. Mormon Stories Podcast YouTube channel, “About” section (this is displayed by clicking on the statement near the top of the page, “Mormon Stories Podcast is the longest-running and most successful podcast in Mormonism”), youtube.com/mormonstories.

Saints.”³⁵ It is unclear how selling products that offend Church members, threaten violence, mock temple ceremonies, or publicly promote illegal drug use contributes to those purposes. But it is clear that these critics willfully cultivate hostility toward the Church and its leaders in their videos. Assuming those who contribute money to these critics hold negative feelings toward the Church, increasing the overall number of people who feel contempt against the Church and capturing that audience as listeners has the potential of increasing their total donations. Again, this does not refute the validity of their arguments, but it raises reasonable questions about their behavior and reliability.

When bringing attention to their financial motivations, prominent critics contend that any emphasis on their making substantial incomes is hypocritical, given that the Church has reserves that are estimated at over \$100 billion. If you simply look at how much critics generate in revenue and compare it straight across to the reserves of the Church, without regard to organizational size or how funds are used, their arguments may appear reasonable. But a deeper, more thoughtful approach to organizational finances reveals a much different story.

The Church’s Reserves

In a recent interview at the Silicon Slopes Summit, Elder David A. Bednar discussed the three-fold mission of the Church and reminded those who would dictate how the Church should use its reserves that its assets are primarily income-consuming, not income-producing. With 35,000 meetinghouses and facilities, 315 existing or planned temples, and four major institutions of higher education, “you do not have to be an accountant to figure out those are some big dollars.”³⁶ All of those dollars are meant to fulfill one of the three missions of the Church by blessing the lives of individuals and families. Elder Bednar then referenced an Old Testament story in which Joseph interprets a dream for Egypt’s pharaoh as *seven years of plenty and seven years of famine* and then commented, “It would be imprudent and unwise not to have a reserve.”³⁷

35. Mormon Discussions YouTube channel, youtube.com/@MormonDiscussion. Mormon Stories YouTube channel, youtube.com/mormonstories.

36. Kaitlyn Bancroft, “Elder Bednar talks tech at Silicon Slopes Summit,” *Church News*, 29 September 2023, thechurchnews.com/leaders/2023/9/29/23894851/elder-david-bednar-ryan-smith-silicon-slopes-summit-education-church-finance-politics/

37. Bancroft, “Elder Bednar talks tech.”

Furthermore, the Church uses its resources to provide services to millions of individuals weekly, whether they are members of the Church or not. The Church's FamilySearch.org website receives over 22,000,000 visitors per month, the majority from non-members.³⁸ The Church spends in excess of one billion dollars a year on humanitarian aid and an additional billion dollars on education. They provide food, welfare assistance, employment assistance, and dozens of other services that bless the lives of individuals and families. All of these services are available to everyone regardless of their religious affiliation.

What should be done, then, to decrease the number of members who are leaving the Church over the issues raised by critics? The answers to that question are likely varied and difficult to implement because peddling disbelief is certainly easier than instilling faith. There is an argument that a direct countereffort by the Church itself may only bring publicity that ultimately benefits our detractors. Still, some specific actions on a local level seem to make sense and may be worth consideration.

Actions to Consider

As members of a home-centered, Church-supported organization,³⁹ the primary responsibility for education about these issues lies within the home. Teenagers, in particular, are susceptible to online information or influence from their peers, making it crucial to arm them with reliable knowledge. This discussion can be initiated by emphasizing the inherent difficulties in historical events due to the scarcity of credible documentation, including Church history. Consequently, when confronted with negative information about Church history or the Church in general, it would be wise for them to wonder about the source rather than unquestionably accepting it as truth.

Since many parents may be unaware of this threat themselves, this leads to the necessity of a second layer of defense. There are a number of things local Church leaders could consider. For members already impacted by the attacks of critics, our local leaders are frequently not well-read on the arguments and issues involved and therefore may be unable to answer an impacted member's detailed

38. See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "FamilySearch.org Facts: Updated April 2024," familysearch.org/en/newsroom/company-facts

39. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "Home Centered, Church Supported," *Ensign*, October 2018, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/10/home-centered-church-supported](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/10/home-centered-church-supported).

questions. Yes, they can and should encourage impacted members to seek answers through the Holy Ghost. But it is far more difficult for a person who has been impacted to feel that Spirit when their minds are full of unanswered accusations, some of which have shaken them to their core.

Local leaders could, in addition to being more aware of reliable sources of information regarding questions they receive from their members, also have an awareness of the potential financial incentives being realized by a particular organization when a member is troubled by its materials. Such awareness may help members more accurately evaluate the potential for distortion or other aspects of the behavior of the organization in question.

I recognize that there are legitimate questions and concerns raised by sincere people without incentives of financial gain or popularity, but the apparent financial incentives for some of the most prominent and influential critical organizations may not be irrelevant factors.

For members not yet impacted, local leaders may consider the possibility of proactively preparing their members *before* they hear negative criticisms, as the Church has done to some degree with the Gospel Topics Essays in recent years. While there are valid arguments that suggest that preemptively discussing those things will do more harm by introducing these sensitive topics to members previously unaware, such a discussion, when thoughtfully and carefully prepared, can help strengthen faith and prepare members for what they are likely to face. Helping them be more aware of positive resources can help them cope with difficult questions and attacks while also better appreciating the increasingly powerful evidences for the Restoration.

Organizations such as The Interpreter Foundation and FAIR Latter-day Saints could play an important role in the education of members about critical organizations' financial motivations. This could be achieved by encouraging the publication of verifiable data regarding critics of the Church, including financial and other specific information. It is crucial that this data is supported by concrete and verifiable facts.

There are also actions that could be considered at the organizational level of the Church. Namely, the Church might consider including the Gospel Topics Essays more generally in their yearly curriculum. This would not only better educate members about these topics, but it could open the door for healthy and needed discussions about the importance of using credible and faithful resources when researching. It could also be a catalyst to encourage members to exercise caution

around organizations that produce massive volumes of misinformation, and whose goal may be to solicit members in order to capitalize financially. Of course, we aren't the first generation that has had to deal with critics. There are numerous scriptural examples of men or groups of men attempting to destroy the Church anciently who were supported financially by their followers. (See, for example, Alma 1, 46; Helaman 2; Jacob 7; and Mosiah 27.) It would seem prudent to examine their strategies and tactics to better recognize them when modern critics use them today.

In any approach, it is crucial to present information in a Christ-like manner. This is not an endeavor to slander our fellow brothers and sisters who are critics. Rather, it is a warning to our members about corporations employing a business model that impacts Church members. This caution is a straightforward and verifiable message, underscoring the existence of organizations that profit significantly from any members they can persuade to foster feelings of distrust, betrayal, and ultimately, contempt for the Church.

Summary

Critics of the Church may present themselves as mere seekers of truth who are just asking sincere questions, but their actions and apparent financial incentives may be at odds with such innocent appearances.⁴⁰ Understanding the financial incentives associated with the activities of prominent critics may provide members with an additional perspective to help them better cope with questionable attacks on their faith.

There are clearly difficult things to understand about Church history. Like all types of history, our Church's history is fraught with inadequate documentation about certain events to which we all wish we had more solid answers. Likewise, there are many puzzling questions pertaining to the Gospel and our scriptures. However, our members must recognize that the critics' portrayal of events in Church history or of questions related to our doctrine and scriptures often seek to transform the unknown into something sinister or laughable. Instead of simply acquiescing to critics (or, to use their term, having their "shelf break"), there are credible and faith-building answers available through faithful resources like The Interpreter Foundation, FAIR

40. An example discussed by Stephen Smoot is the contrast between the claims of the author of the *CES Letter* and his behavior. See Smoot, "CES Letter Author Jeremy Runnells to Face Disciplinary Action."

Latter-day Saints, and even individual websites and YouTube channels that provide answers to tough questions. Meanwhile, there are many remarkable discoveries being published regularly by Latter-day Saint scholars that strengthen the case for the Restoration and the plausibility of the Book of Mormon, and otherwise may help overcome many of the arguments of our critics. There is a great need to make such information more broadly available and more widely understood to better strengthen faith and understanding, and to better protect members from the trauma of an unnecessary faith crisis.



Ron C. Rhodes spent many years in the banking and direct sales industries. He recently retired as a Director of IT and Project Management and served on the Board of Directors of the Mid-America Bankers Association in Omaha, Nebraska. Ron is the owner/administrator of the Answering LDS Critics website (www.answeringlds.com) and associated YouTube channel. He served a full-time mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the New York Rochester Mission and has fulfilled many callings over the years, finding particular joy in teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Ron and his wife, Ruth, are parents of three children and grandparents to nine grandchildren.