COMMUNITY OF CHRIST LEADER STEPS DOWN

W. GRANT MCMURRAY, president of the Community of Christ (formerly known as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints), resigned abruptly on November 29.

“For a matter of several years I have struggled with personal and family issues that have impacted my ability to function unrestrainedly in my office and calling,” wrote McMurray in a cryptic resignation letter that falls one step short of being an open apology. “I have done my very best to fulfill my responsibilities in accordance with the needs of the church and believe that God has gracefully blessed me in that effort. However, along the way I have made some inappropriate choices, and the circumstances of my life are now such that I cannot continue to effectively lead the church. I deeply regret the difficulties that this causes for the church I love.” McMurray’s letter also notes that he had just recently been diagnosed with early onset Parkinson’s disease but indicated that the diagnosis was not an overriding factor in his decision to step down.

McMurray did not name a successor. His two counselors, Peter A. Judd and Kenneth N. Robinson, accepted the resignation and will lead the 250,000-member church as co-presidents until a successor is named.

In McMurray’s eight years as church president, the Community of Christ experienced several dramatic achievements that include changing the name of the church, softening policies against gays, and ordaining three women to the Quorum of the Twelve.

These changes are seen as a continuation of a process initiated by the previous president, Wallace B. Smith. The last of Joseph Smith’s descendants to preside over the church, Wallace Smith led the transformation of the church from its Restorationist origins into something approaching a mainstream Christian denomination. In 1994, Smith completed the temple in Independence, Missouri, which the Community of Christ sees as the fulfillment of prophecies in section 57 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

In a statement prepared for SUNSTONE, Bill Russell, a history professor at Graceland University, wrote: ‘Grant articulated a new vision for the Community of Christ with skill and wit. His leadership will be missed. It is a sad day for the Community of Christ."

EVANGELICAL LEADER APOLOGIZES TO MORMONS; CREATES STIR

“We HAVE SINNED against you.” That was the startling statement made by Fuller Theological Seminary president Richard J. Mouw to his audience 14 November at the Mormon Tabernacle. “The God of the Scriptures makes it clear that it is a terrible thing to bear false witness against our neighbors,” Mouw continued, “and we have been guilty of that sort of transgression in things we have said about you. We have told you what you believe without making a sincere effort first of all to ask you what you believe.”

Mouw was one of the speakers during “An Evening of Friendship,” an event co-sponsored by Standing Together, a network of fifty evangelical churches, and by BYU’s Richard L. Evans Chair for Religious Understanding. Mouw reminded his audience that “there are very real issues of disagreement between us—and . . . some of these issues are matters of eternal significance. But we can now discuss these topics as friends.”

Mouw’s remarks did not sit well with all attendees. In a Baptist Press article, Tim Clark, executive director of the Utah-Idaho Baptist Convention, suggests that given his status as an evangelical leader, Mouw’s statements “muddy the waters” by giving “credence to the Mormon message.”

In an email to the Baptist Press, Mouw defended his remarks as serving dialogue opportunities with Latter-day Saints on salvation through Jesus Christ alone and Christ’s atoning work on the cross.

Other speakers at the gathering included Ravi Zacharias, a prominent author whose presence some perceived as controversial. Zacharias co-edited the most recent version of The Kingdom of the Cults, a book that depicts the LDS Church, Islam, Hinduism, and Jehovah’s Witnesses as cults. “Basically, he agreed to lend his name to [the book], but didn’t write any of it,” BYU religion professor Robert Millet told the Deseret Morning News. Millet has been arranging private meetings between BYU religion professors and evangelical counterparts since 1997. In that year, Denver Seminary’s Craig Blomberg and BYU’s Stephen Robinson coauthored How Wide the Divide: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation.

The Tabernacle event was not advertised by the Church, but stories previewing it appeared in the Deseret Morning News and other venues. Days later, the media section of the LDS Church website posted links to stories about the speech that appeared in the Salt Lake Tribune, Christianity Today, and Beliefnet.com, which has a complete transcript of Mouw’s remarks.

With an evangelical scholar as keynote speaker, the meeting is believed to be the first such event since Dwight L. Moody, founder of the Bible Institute in Chicago, appeared in the Tabernacle in 1871.
LDS CHURCH SENDS HELP TO TSUNAMI VICTIMS

WITH THE SUPPORT of Mormons and non-Mormons alike, the LDS Church has mounted a plan to help survivors of the tsunami that devastated southeast Asia on 26 December.

Hours after learning of the disaster, Garry Flake, director of emergency response for the Church, flew to the disaster regions to assess needs in Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Thailand, and India.

In a joint effort between Mormons and Muslims, the LDS Church loaded more than seventy tons of relief supplies into an Indonesian-bound plane chartered by the California-based Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW). The Church and the IRW have also partnered in the past, sending help to Iraq, Bangladesh, and Sudan.

The First Presidency prepared a statement asking members to be “most generous” in their January fast offerings, as the Church pours money, food, medical supplies, and hygiene items to the disaster areas. The Church is also gathering donations via the official website at www.lds.org.

MORMON SCHOLAR DISFELLOWSHIPPED

A FORMER LDS INSTITUTE director was disciplined 13 December for his writings on the origins of Mormonism. After a six-hour disciplinary hearing, Grant Palmer, 64, was disfellowshipped for having written An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins, in which he argues that the Book of Mormon is better explained as a nineteenth-century document than as an ancient record.

“I regard myself as heretical regarding some of the Church’s teachings, but I don’t view myself as an apostate,” said Palmer shortly after learning he was being charged with apostasy.

A year ago, Palmer’s stake president Keith Adams received a dossier on Palmer from the Strengthening Church Members Committee, but for reasons that are unclear to Palmer, Adams chose to delay the proceedings.

One week before the hearing, a group of LDS supporters posted a web page calling Palmer an “author, historian, and true Christian” and inviting members to sign a petition. “The Gospel has nothing to fear from truth,” reads the page, posted at <www.supportgrantpalmer2.netfirms.com>. “We can only progress if each of us has the courage to stand up for what we have learned through our mortal existence.”

In An Insider’s View, Palmer states that there is no evidence Joseph Smith ever translated correctly any ancient record, and he concludes that the Book of Mormon “reflects the intellectual and cultural environment of Joseph’s own time and place” (p. 259).

Following his disfellowship, Palmer received a letter from the stake leadership inviting him to pray and read the scriptures so he might fully understand the nature of his transgression. Palmer has repeatedly said he doesn’t know how to repent for saying things that he feels are true.

During a 2003 Sunstone Symposium session in Salt Lake City, Palmer alleged that he knows a dozen seminary and institute teachers in the Salt Lake Valley alone who also do not believe in the historicity of the Book of Mormon (tape SL03-275).

MORMON BECOMES TOP DEMOCRAT; TAKES HEAT FOR “INBRED” LDS RACISM

LDS SENATOR HARRY Reid, D-Nev., became the highest-ranking Mormon in the history of American politics when he was recently installed as U.S. Senate minority leader, replacing Senator Tom Daschle who lost his November reelection bid. The son of a hard-rock miner from Searchlight, Nevada, Reid earned two degrees from Utah colleges and was declared an “environmental champion” by the League of Conservation Voters for his adamant opposition to nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain.

With his elevation, Reid becomes arguably the most powerful Democrat in Washington, creating a spotlight on his opinions and actions that is certain to get hotter. And a conservative African-American columnist has taken the first swing.

In an opinion column posted 14 December at WorldNetDaily.com, Mychal Massie claims that Reid’s recent criticisms of black Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas were influenced by Reid’s Mormonism. In a 5 December interview on Meet the Press, Reid had called Thomas “an embarrassment to the Supreme Court.” He then explained, saying: “I think that his opinions are poorly written. I just don’t think that he’s done a good job as a Supreme Court justice.”

“Reid’s comments should surprise no one,” writes Massie.
“He is simply being true to his inbred familial heritage.” In order to bolster the view that Mormons are inherently racist, Massie quotes statements on the cursed nature of blacks by Brigham Young, Orson Hyde, and Joseph Fielding Smith, among others.

In a recent Salt Lake Tribune article, columnist Paul Rolly notes that while Massie is eager to play the religion card on Reid, he refrained from doing the same when LDS Senator Orrin Hatch opposed some of Bill Clinton’s African-American judicial nominees. “Reid, as a liberal, is attacked as a racist for expressing philosophical differences,” writes Rolly, “while Hatch escaped such dangerous criticism because Hatch is a fellow conservative.”

**People**

**Ended.** On 30 November, the record-breaking Jeopardy! performance of KEN JENNINGS, a Latter-day Saint computer software designer from Salt Lake City, Jennings finally lost on his seventy-fifth show, finishing his run with a winnings total of $2,520,700, which surpassed the previous all-time game show tally of $2.18 million, won by Dr. Kevin Olmstead on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? Hoping to capitalize even more on the ratings bonanza generated by Jennings’s appearances, and the desire by many to see how Jennings might fare against past Jeopardy! champions, the show’s producers have announced plans for a “Super Tournament.” The competition, which will begin airing in February or March, will feature matches between nearly 150 past champions, with plans to have the two surviving winners face Jennings in a final match sometime in May.

**Resigned.** At the urging of athletic department officials, GARY CROWTON, on 1 December, as head coach of the Brigham Young University football team. Crowton’s up-then-down tenure with the Cougars began in 2000 with twelve consecutive wins, followed by two disappointing losses at the end of that first campaign. Fortunes never turned for the better for Crowton-led teams, who in the next three seasons compiled a combined 14–21 win-loss record. On 13 December, BYU announced the hiring of new head coach BRONCO MENDENHALL, who for the past two seasons had served as Crowton’s defensive coordinator. The hire makes Mendenhall, at age 38, the second-youngest NCAA Division IA football coach.

**Nominated.** Latter-day Saint MICHAEL LEAVITT, to head the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. After eleven years as Utah governor, Leavitt moved to Washington last year when appointed head of the Environment Protection Agency. If confirmed to his new post, Leavitt will be involved in policies that regulate controversial moral issues such as abortion funding and stem-cell research.

**Divorced.** LDS former Marine JASON JOHNSON and Bahraini royal MERIAM AL-KHALIFA, the couple whose story provided the basis for the made-for-television movie The Princess and the Marine. The couple met in 1999 in Bahrain, an island kingdom off the coast of Saudi Arabia, where Johnson was stationed. Johnson was later court-martialed for his role in helping Al-Khalifa enter the U.S. using forged documents. The couple married in Las Vegas in November 1999.

**Arrested:** Imposter teenager KENNETH LICKISS, on charges of theft and forgery. After serving an LDS mission in Poland, 23-year old Lickiss successfully impersonated a 15-year-old boy and lived on the streets of Los Angeles. Befriended by an LDS missionary in 1994, the “teenager” was baptized a second time. Under the assumed name of Scott Davion, Lickiss lived for four years with an LDS family in Salt Lake City, where he went to high school, took a date to the prom, and scored a perfect 36 on his ACT.

**Excommunicated.** Chilean gay leader BRUS LEGUAS CONTRERAS, on charges of apostasy and conduct unbecoming a member of the Church, after Contreras refused to resign as president of Chile’s chapter of Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons. The disciplinary actions were reportedly started by the LDS Area Presidency in Chile, which was alleged to have prepared a dossier detailing Contreras’s activities with Affirmation.

**LDS VOTERS UTILIZE INTERNET IN 2004 ELECTION**

MUCH HAS BEEN written about how the Internet revolutionized the 2004 presidential election. It also had an effect on LDS voters, uniting them in ways that have never happened before. At the grassroots level, many LDS voters organized themselves on email lists. On the left, two prominent lists began at Yahoogroups. In November 2003, Ryan Roberts began the list LDS-Left as a place to bring together members of the Church with “leanings to the left.” Roberts’s list eventually attracted more than a hundred members with a variety of political perspectives. MormonsforKerry brought together members of the
Media Watch

THE WORK AND THE GLORY IS NOW A MOVIE

THE FIRST OF Gerald Lund’s nine-volume series, The Work and the Glory, has made the jump from the printed page to celluloid. With the financial support of Salt Lake business mogul Larry Miller, the $8.5 million adaptation is considered the most expensive LDS film ever produced for a general audience. Filmed in Tennessee, The Work and the Glory follows Joshua and Nathan Steed, two brothers on a journey near Palmyra, New York, where they compete for the same love interest and meet Joseph Smith.

“If we made this picture for a million dollars, people would be burning the book in the streets, and us in effigy,” said producer Scott Swofford to the Deseret Morning News. “So it really had to be a larger film, epic in nature, and it had to look incredible.”

According to industry insiders, financier Miller will make his investment back only if the film grosses about $5 million at the box office and sells 600,000 DVDs. The film, which has grossed $1.6 million since its Thanksgiving release in Utah, opens nationwide 21 January.

CHURCH PRODUCING “DOCTRINALLY SOUND” MOVIE ON JOSEPH SMITH

WHILE RICHARD DUTCHER’S planned film about the life of Joseph Smith is still at the storyboard stage, LDS leaders have announced the production of a lavish, one-hour movie on the same subject. Joseph Smith: Prophet of the Restoration is scheduled to premiere in December 2005, the two-hundredth anniversary of the prophet’s birth.

The project is being carried forward with heavy involvement by the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Church’s correlation department. “Members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve have taken a very personal role to be comfortable with the way the life of Joseph Smith is portrayed,” says Elder Donald L. Hallstrom, executive director of the Church audiovisual department. “It is doctrinally sound, historically accurate, and very appealing, very engaging. Hopefully people will learn some things and feel some things and like it.”

Very little has been released about the script, but stories in the Deseret Morning News suggest that the film will cover most of Joseph Smith’s life, from age seven to his martyrdom at thirty-eight. Four actors have been tapped to depict the prophet at different stages of his life, including his painful leg surgery.

At the closing session of the 2002 Sunstone Symposium, LDS auteur Richard Dutcher described the task of shooting the life of Joseph Smith as “the Mount Everest of Mormon filmmaking” (tape SL02-371).

Once completed, the film will screen at the Legacy Theater in Temple Square, replacing The Testaments: Of One Fold and One Shepherd, which has been playing since March 2000.

DESERET BOOK TO BUY EXCEL ENTERTAINMENT

HAS THE BIG FISH eaten the little fish? Some say yes after LDS-owned Desert Book announced in November that it will buy Excel Entertainment, a private distributor of Mormon-themed films and music. The deal puts in the Church’s hands the distribution rights to musicians such as Kenneth Cope and Julie de Azevedo, as well as movies such as God’s Army and The Work and the Glory.

Even though the film group will retain the Excel name, some worry about the impact this deal will have on Excel’s tradition of celebrating the popular side of Mormon culture. Would an LDS-owned group allow anything like the scatological humor that provoked laughter during God’s Army, or the violence that made audiences cry during Saints and Soldiers?

The Deseret Morning News quotes Excel President Jeff Simpson as saying that Deseret Book won’t exert any “more control than we exercise ourselves.”

MORMON-THEMED MOVIES PROTESTED

ACCORDING TO STORIES circulating in print and the Internet, two recent Mormon-themed movies are being boy-
cotted, but the protestors seem to come from two completely different fronts. Writer/director Mitch Davis wrote in an email that people who recently saw The Other Side of Heaven on Starz cable network “have already begun complaining to Starz about their decision to air a movie with Mormon themes.” “Our movie has many friends and a few enemies,” laments Davis.

While critics of The Other Side seem to be largely anti-Mormons, the gay romantic comedy Latter Days is being protested by many Mormon faithful. Latter-day Saint Alyson Johnson has organized a protest against Blockbuster for distributing the film, and Logan resident Jacob Ricks sent a letter to the Deseret Morning News asking readers to boycott Borders, one of the bookstores carrying the movie. Latter Days is no stranger to controversy, as the premiere was delayed last year in Salt Lake City when Madstone Theaters first agreed and then refused to screen it.

TOO MORMON FOR CABLE?
The Starz network’s showing of the LDS-themed adventure The Other Side of Heaven has elicited complaints from some subscribers.

CLAREMON MOVING FORWARD ON MORMON STUDIES

THE MOMENTUM TOWARD the establishment of a Mormon studies program at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, continues to gain strength. A conference, “Positioning Mormonism in Religious Studies and American History,” was held 24–26 October, bringing to the campus prominent LDS thinkers together with religion scholars from various southern California universities.

The conference was designed with the dual goal of being a “working conference,” in which the participants posed questions and discussed issues with one another, while also serving as a good introduction for non-academics of the kinds of approaches one might expect to find in a university Mormon studies program. Toward that end, the conference’s opening session was a lecture, “Is This Safe? Mormon History and the Secular Academy,” by Grant Underwood, of the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute of Latter-day Saint History. Underwood’s lecture was geared toward alleviating hesitation among Church members who are wary of potential dangers to testimony inherent in academic approaches to religion.

Following each of the conference’s main “working sessions,” the conference also featured optional hour-long, “break-out group” sessions where non-specialists could discuss the various issues raised during the scholarly presentations and exchanges.
Besides Underwood, featured LDS speakers were Kathleen Flake, Terryl Givens, Philip Barlow, and Kathryn Daynes. Notable respondents to their papers included Ivan Strenski, Vincent Wimbush, Catherine Albanese, William Deverell, and Robert Ellwood.

Further progress toward establishing a Mormon studies presence on the CGU campus is evidenced by a graduate seminar, “Mormonism in the History of the American West,” taught by LDS professor emeritus Armand L. Mauss, scheduled to begin 18 January.

The Council on the Study of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, organized as advisors and fundraisers for Mormon studies on the campus, has announced that a fall 2005 conference will center on the career of Joseph Smith as a prophet within a larger theme of prophecy in a multi-religious context. The council expects to be ready at that conference to formally announce the establishment of an endowed chair in Mormon studies, a position they anticipate having filled in 2006.

**PRESIDENT HINCKLEY APPEARS ON LARRY KING LIVE—AGAIN!**

For the fourth time since 1998, President Gordon B. Hinckley appeared on CNN’s “Larry King Live.” The interview, pre-taped at the Conference Center in Temple Square, aired on 26 December. In 1997, Larry King married Shawn Engemann, a Mormon twenty-seven years his junior, and in the ensuing

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**MR. MOORE GOES TO UTAH COUNTY**

AMID CONTROVERSY, OSCAR-WINNING filmmaker Michael Moore appeared 20 October before a sell-out audience of 8,000 at Utah Valley State College, in Orem, Utah. To the delight of the largely liberal, approving crowd, Moore, director of the documentary Farenheit 9/11 and well-known for his blistering criticisms of the Bush administration, delivered plenty of jabs at all the expected targets. But he also showed a gentle and patriotic side, reading emotional letters from soldiers stationed in Iraq and then asking all veterans in the audience to stand, before leading an extended ovation.

The weeks before Moore’s visit were dominated by a firestorm of protests from conservative students, parents, and other Utah County residents who objected to the public university’s paying $40,000 to bring in Moore, whose positions, it was argued, did not reflect community values in the predominately Republican county and state. One resident, Kay Anderson, even offered student leaders a cashier’s check of $25,000 (later raised to $40,000) to cancel the event. The student leaders refused, a move which drew this effusive praise from Moore: “They have this radical belief that Utah is still in the United States of America.”

In an effort to provide a balance to Moore’s radical liberalism, UVSC agreed to invite conservative Fox news personality and political pundit Sean Hannity to campus. Hannity agreed, and, in a mixed gesture, waived his usual $100,000 speaking fee but ultimately stuck the school with a $50,000 bill for travel expenses. The visit was Hannity’s second in less than four months, as he had been a featured participant in Provo’s July 4th “Stadium of Fire” spectacular.

Utah Valley State College continues to suffer the fallout from the controversy as Joe Vogel, the college’s student body academic vice president and the one who was the most instrumental in bringing Moore to campus, has been forced to resign after making public comments about a book he is writing on the experience.
years became acquainted with President Hinckley. Some highlights from the recent interview (source, CNN.com):

On President Bush and Prayer

KING: Is it important to you that the president be as—for want of a better term—religious as he is? Does that comfort you that politics and religion somehow have come together in this administration?

HINCKLEY: . . . Yes. I'm glad to see that he is religious, that he does pray. I believe in prayer, in divine power. And I'm grateful that he's a prayerful man, yes.

KING: When you pray, what is that? What's occurring? Are you talking to God? You're a prophet, so God talks to you.

HINCKLEY: I'm talking to God, yes. I do pray. Of course I do.

KING: What do you do when they're not answered?

HINCKLEY: Well, they are answered, but not always just the way you'd want them.

KING: Sometimes it's no.

HINCKLEY: Sometimes it's no.

On Gay People and Gay Marriage

KING: I know that the Church is opposed to gay marriage.

HINCKLEY: Yes.

KING: Do you have an alternative? Do you like the idea of civil unions?

HINCKLEY: Well, we're not anti-gay. We are pro-family. Let me put it that way. And we love these people and try to work with them and help them. We know they have a problem. We want to help them solve that problem.

KING: A problem they caused, or they were born with?

HINCKLEY: I don't know. I'm not an expert on these things. I don't pretend to be an expert on these things. The fact is, they have a problem.

KING: Do you favor some sort of state union?

HINCKLEY: Well, we want to be very careful about that, because that—whatever may lead to gay marriage, we're not in favor of. We—many people don't get married. Goodness sakes alive. You know that. Many people who have to discipline themselves. If they transgress, they become subject to the discipline of the Church. But we try in every way that we know how to help them, to assist them, to bless their lives.

On Women and Blacks

KING: The Mormons' public image in dealing with stereotypes. One, women are regarded lesser in the Church.

HINCKLEY: Oh, there's no substance to it. Ask the women. You'll get the answer.

KING: They can't get your job, though.

HINCKLEY: No, they can't. They've got one of their own, and that's a very responsible job. They have their own organization. They have their own board. It's the largest women's organization in the world with four million members. There's nothing like it anywhere else in the world. And they run a tremendous organization.

KING: How is the Church doing with black membership?

HINCKLEY: Wonderfully. Wonderfully. I was in Africa last January, dedicated a temple in Accra, Ghana. We have a great facility there. I'll be back in Nigeria sometime this coming year to dedicate a new temple there. And that temple will be devoted almost exclusively for the work that black people will do there.

KING: Do you envision someday a black prophet?

HINCKLEY: Could well be within the realm of possibility.

Solar Flare

MORMON GUINNESS FEATURES THE WONDERFUL, THE WORST, AND THE WEIRD

DO YOU KNOW which is the only dinosaur named after an LDS apostle?1 Which general authority saw his plane hijacked and diverted to Cuba?2 Who was the Mormon who lent a paper shredder to Oliver North during the Iran-Contra affair?3 These are three of the 1,600 entries in The Skousen Book of Mormon World Records and Other Amazing Firsts, Facts, & Feats, a book of odd facts about all things Mormon.

The book contains more conventional records as well. For instance, the first Latter-day Saint to become Miss Universe was Linda Bement, in 1960. Richard Jones, from Sandy, Utah, was the oldest person to ever cross the Atlantic in a boat (named “Brother of Jared”). In 1988, Nate J. Anderson, a Mormon from Alaska, caught the largest king salmon ever hauled in with a 80-lb. test fishing line—and has a picture to prove it.

“A person would have to be insane and have serious obsessive compulsive behavior issues to want to do something like this—which I guess I have,” says author Paul Skousen, who worked on his book for sixteen years. He says he wrote his book on weekends, late at night, and during his lunch hours. “And sometimes during a boring high councilman talk,” he quips, Well, sometimes I had a notepad with me.”

For more amazing and not-so-amazing facts, visit www.mormonworldrecords.com.

Answers. 1. The Torvosaurus tanneri, named after N. Eldon Tanner. 2. Elder William H. Bennett in 1972. 3. Paul Skousen, who worked as a spy for the CIA.