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Ex-Mormon Web site widens with views, questions of faith

By Patty Henetz
The Associated Press

Eight years ago, Eric Kettunen built the Web site exmormon.org to help people who were struggling with their decision to leave the Mormon church.

He hoped to offer a dozen or so people the kind of help and support others had given him and his wife when they left the faith years earlier. It took two months to get 2,000 "hits" on the site. Now, exmormon.org gets that many in 15 minutes.

The main draw: Mormons who wouldn't dream of questioning church doctrine or history publicly can do so privately as part of a large online community where people aren't required to identify themselves.

"I never imagined it becoming as big as it did," said Kettunen. "Many thousands realize they aren't alone in their thinking."

[Exmormon.org](http://exmormon.org) describes itself as a Web site for former members and those questioning their faith in the organization of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Along with helpers in Europe and the West Coast, Kettunen serves as a site administrator, monitoring exmormon.org for suspect or offensive posts and deleting messages that stray into unwanted topics, such as politics.

"We're not trying to beat the church up," said Larry Braithwaite, a St. George resident who helped Kettunen set up the site. "We're just trying to lay the evidence out and let people decide for themselves."

The site has a definite slant, however, which is to offer up information about the Mormon church that might lead readers to question or quit the religion.

"We are getting more and more Mormons who are questioning the validity of the religion and the way the church is acting," said Richard Packham, a Roseburg, Ore., resident who also helped Kettunen with the project.

As an interactive message board, exmormon.org is part of the growing online phenomenon dubbed "word of mouse."

Massachusetts Institute of Technology economics professor Chris Dellarocas is one of several academics studying the power of online communities to affect reputations and change established institutions, commerce, the media and politics.

Dellarocas said that as the Internet has grown, people are turning away from establishment opinion and conventional marketing toward the "collective wisdom" of peers.



Tammy Braithwaite holds a copy of her manuscript that is on the Web site exmormon.org. Her husband, Larry, helped create the site for former LDS members. (Nick Adams/The Associated Press)

While there are people who post bitter messages on exmormon.org calling for the church's downfall, most participants seek clarification on church teachings or ask for help and support as they make their decisions to leave the church and suffer the subsequent personal and family turmoil.

Seeking closure: Dealing with the fallout has lasted a lifetime for San Francisco-area resident Cheryl Vaught, who grew up Mormon in Utah in the 1950s, and has family roots that reach back to church founder Joseph Smith and the first Mormon pioneers.

When she went to Arizona State University in the late 1960s, she realized she had other choices about how to live.

"It was an awakening for me," she said.

Vaught knew she would have conflicts with her family and friends. "I didn't even care," she said. "I was just thrilled to be out of it."

She married a man with no connection to Mormonism and moved to California, and gave the church little thought for many years.

Five years ago, a friend told her about exmormon.org.

Vaught read all the personal stories on the site, perused online chats and signed up for an ex-Mormon conference, where she made new friends and realized she still had issues to deal with. Now, she posts to the forum almost daily.

"It's something like recovering from alcoholism. It's a lifelong journey," Vaught said. "It was a very good feeling to find this board even at my stage."

Many churches have their own Web sites and e-mail lists to spread their messages and attract new members. The Mormon church put up its own official Web site, ldschurch.org, in 1997. "The Internet is a fascinating thing in the sense that everyone is instantly a publisher," Quorum of the Twelve member Henry B. Eyring said at the time. "It's a very large room in which everyone is shouting, and the quality of ideas is the only thing that distinguishes one person from another."

But as more churches reach out, disaffected members of faiths including Christians, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientologists, Amish and Pagans have their sites, too, listed individually or as part of Web rings. The Web site beliefnet.com has links to hundreds of these sites, some of which have online forums.

Tim Weedn, a Fort Worth, Texas, filmmaker shooting a documentary about Mormons who leave the church, said that in 1998, when he first discovered the exmormon.org board, "you could put a post up and it would stay a couple of days. Now, your post gets buried in a couple of seconds."

Kettunen estimates at least 25,000 people each week visit the site, which offers personal stories, essays, a short-topic compilation and a bulletin board. The board, he said, gets more than 900 posts per day -- so many that administrators have to purge "threads" -- topic headings -- after two weeks.

Moving on: Some people participate with the exmormon.org community only briefly. Of those, some go back to the Mormon church; a few turn to other religions. But a larger number decide no longer to define themselves as "ex-Mormons," and move on with their lives.

"It got to the point I was just spending too much time there," said a Mapleton resident who asked to be identified only by her first name, Annie.

When she was spending 15 or 20 hours per week on the site, "it really filled a need," she said. "It's recovery. It really is. You have to go through the cycle and then one day, 'Hmm. I'm moving on.'"

The Mormon church has several faith-building Web sites, and at one time owned the Internet server mstar2.net. "Beyond urging members to use wisdom and judgment in their use of the Internet or any other medium of communication, we have made no comment on specific Web sites," said church spokesman Coke Newell.

Park City resident Steven Clark left the church seven years ago. He said he set up the interactive

latterdaylampoon.com, "as the result of my own apostasy and to handle the personal pain of leaving in a humorous, satirical way."

Clark used to post frequently on exmormon.org, but now just checks the board for information about the church's activities that wouldn't otherwise be available.

"This is a worldwide, forceful institution," Clark said. "But the church can't control information leaks."

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On the Net:

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

<http://www.ldschurch.org>

Ex-Mormons or those critical of the church:

<http://www.exmormon.org>

<http://www.latterdaylampoon.org>

Questions/discusses doctrine and history, but is not anti-Mormon:

<http://www.lds-mormon.com/>

A Christian anti-Mormon site:

<http://www.utlm.org>



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