



Society for Case Research

THE MORMON STORIES PODCAST: FAITH, DISAFFILIATION, AND STRATEGIC VISION

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It was 12:30 a.m. on a Tuesday night and John Dehlin was sitting at his kitchen table in front of a laptop debating whether or not to open the next email in his inbox. He glanced at the time at the bottom of his computer screen, promised himself this would be the last one for the night, and double-clicked:

I started listening to your podcast a couple months ago. I'm sure you get this all the time, but I just wanted to thank you. I can't talk to my husband, or my sisters, or anyone, really, and I thought I was going crazy. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found your website. Knowing that there are other people out there that feel the same way I do makes all the difference. How do I find out if there is a local Mormon Stories group near me?

The email was signed "Margie, in Portland." John leaned back in his chair and interlocked his fingers behind his head. Responding to Margie would be easy. He'd just added a tab on the Mormon Stories website with links to the Facebook pages of different local groups. All he needed to do was send her the link. He sighed, leaned back over his keyboard and was about to begin typing a reply but then decided he was too tired.

John started the podcast in September, 2005. Now, more than six years later, he could look back and see that at different times he had emphasized different organizational objectives. Initially, the purpose of the podcast had been to explore, through personal stories, some of the difficult and controversial aspects of Mormonism. Over time this emphasis had shifted to a more traditional entertainment model that involved seeking out well-known Mormon figures for interviews. Mixed in with these objectives had been his desire to help those dealing with a crises of faith, and these efforts had led to recent efforts to establish local Mormon Stories communities and to sponsor Mormon Stories conferences in different cities. Although his motivations and objectives had evolved over the years, one constant had been his dedication to promoting an

environment for the “authentic self-expression and the open discussion of Mormonism” (“About,” n.d.).

Earlier in the day, John had reviewed download data for his podcast for 2012. New podcasts were averaging between 70,000 and 150,000 downloads and the Mormon Stories website was receiving approximately 3,000 hits per day. Donations had grown to the point that he could afford to pay himself a salary and he had recently begun thinking about how he could transform Mormon Stories from a personal hobby into a legitimate and self-sustaining business—one that would be capable of continued growth without his participation. As a first step in this direction, he had recently set up a 501c3 non-profit—the Open Stories Foundation—and had transferred all of Mormon Stories’ assets to it.

A number of questions remained unanswered, however. Although the Open Stories Foundation was a non-profit, it operated under the same constraints as any business. It had to acquire resources, convert those resources into a finished product, and then “sell” that product to individuals who valued it. Ultimately the success—and the longevity—of the foundation would depend on its ability to generate as least as much in donations (and other inputs) as it cost to generate its products (or outputs). It was essential that the organization have a clear vision and mission to guide it in this process. “If someone asked me to write a brief vision or mission statement for the Mormon Stories podcast,” John asked himself, “would I be able to do it?”

As he thought about what he’d been able to accomplish over the last six years, he felt satisfied that the sacrifices he’d made had been worth it. He also felt he was now at an important crossroads. Careful alignment of the foundation’s day-to-day activities with its vision and mission would allow it to make progress toward important organizational objectives, and that progress would lead to an increase in donations. An increase in donations would allow the organization to enhance its resources and capabilities, contributing to more progress, and this would create a virtuous cycles of organizational growth.

John knew he needed to think carefully about his vision for the Open Stories Foundation, its resources and capabilities, and how those resources and capabilities should be managed over time. Right now, though, he needed to go to bed. He stood up and stretched. As he climbed the stairs to his bedroom, he made a mental note to reply to Margie’s email first thing in the morning.

The Mormon Stories Podcast

John Dehlin was raised a Mormon. He served a two year mission for the Mormon Church in Guatemala and continued to actively participate in the Mormon Church into adulthood. John had a long-standing interest in biographies and documentaries. He was inspired by the work of Terry Gross at NPR¹ and Doug Fabrizio at Radio West² and had traveled to Hawaii for a three-day seminar on digital storytelling (Goble, 2005). He had worked as a software consultant for Bain & Company and had worked at Microsoft for a number of years, so he was familiar with the required technology.³

In September 2005, after experiencing a personal faith crisis, but deciding to remain a Mormon, he started a series of interviews called Mormon Stories (see the Mormon Stories website: <http://www.mormonstories.org>). John actively sought out prominent Mormons and/or Mormons with interesting stories to tell, and conducted relatively long and wide-ranging interviews in which guests talked openly about their experiences and beliefs. By choosing his guests carefully, John was able to address difficult and/or controversial aspects of Mormonism through the lens of the personal experiences of his interviewees. The podcasts were unique in the sense that John provided relatively little commentary and tried to avoid imposing his views or biases too overtly. He made his interviews publically available in podcast format⁴ and on the Mormon Stories website (<http://www.mormonstories.org>). The podcast quickly gained a following, with average downloads of individual episodes reaching 10,000 by 2007. During this time period, a number of his podcasts were broadcast on KVNU in Logan, Utah, reaching a potential audience of between two and three hundred thousand listeners, many of whom lived in Salt Lake City. The success of the show brought John a degree of notoriety. In 2007, for example, he was quoted in a story on Mormonism that appeared in the *New York Times* (Goodstein, 2007) and appeared in an ABC News video segment on Mormonism and politics.⁵

Although he was convinced that the Mormon Church was a well-meaning institution that did a lot of good, he was sometimes surprised by the amount of damage it left in its wake. For Mormons, the reevaluation of religious beliefs was almost always more than just a personal struggle. It had the potential to undermine ongoing relationships with family, friends, and acquaintances. It often led to social isolation and a loss of identity, and in some cases, it could lead to divorce, depression, and even suicide. He knew from personal experience that the process was traumatic and often accompanied by an overwhelming sense of confusion and uncertainty.

Looking back, John could see now that he had started the podcast as a form of personal exploration. He had wanted to explore his own faith and the podcast had allowed him to do that. Although many of his friends had been skeptical that his podcast would attract any listeners, the numerous emails he received every week, many emotional in nature, and almost all of them enthusiastically positive, were enough to convince him that he was producing something that a significant number of people found valuable.

For his listeners, the podcast represented more than just entertainment. Many of these individuals seemed desperate for information from sources they perceived to be friendly to Mormonism, but that would provide more authentic and nuanced examinations of Mormon life than those often available from the Mormon Church itself, or from outlets officially sanctioned by the church. Based on feedback from listeners, John suspected that a significant percentage of his audience were Mormons who were in the process of reevaluating their religious beliefs. In John's experience, some of these individuals would eventually find a way to remain Mormon, as he had, but many would eventually find their own spiritual path outside of Mormonism. John was careful to keep his podcast neutral in the sense that he refrained from advocating for any particular course of action. Instead, he focused on letting his listeners extract their own meaning from the personal experiences of the people he interviewed.

Many of those who contacted him asked for advice or asked if he could put them in touch with other people or groups that might be able to help. Many of these individuals had begun to actively seek out information about the Mormon Church from various sources. For example, many had discovered—or were in the process of discovering—what had become known as the Mormon Bloggernacle (see Appendix A). This term, a play on the name of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, was often used to collectively describe the numerous Mormon-themed blogs that examined and debated different aspects of Mormonism.⁶

Many of John's early decisions with regard to the form and content of his podcast were intuitive. He decided early on in the process that he wanted his interviews to be positive. Despite this, he realized that some of the information in his podcast would likely prove troublesome for the average Mormon. When asked shortly after starting the podcast about the difficulty of exploring controversial topics without undermining the faith of his listeners, he'd responded by saying that all he was doing was "trying really hard just to understand" (Goble, 2005). The tagline he decided to use on the web site was also an indication of John's intentions: "Exploring, celebrating and challenging Mormon culture through stories." The words in this tagline were carefully chosen.

The Mormon Church

The official name of the Mormon Church was The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.⁷ The church was established with six original members in April 6, 1830. At the end of 2012, it reported a total membership of 14,782,473 in 29,014 congregations ("2012 Statistical Report," 2012). Approximately 6.3 million of its worldwide members resided in the U.S. ("Facts and Statistics," 2012). The church had a presence in 176 countries or territories ("The Church," n.d.).

As in other Christian denominations, Jesus Christ was the primary focus of the Mormon Church's doctrines and practices. In an effort to emphasize this point, as of January 1, 2012, the first sentence on the "About Us" page on the official church website stated: "Mormons, for all the other things that set us apart, believe first and foremost that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Redeemer" ("About us," n.d.).

As a quick Google search demonstrates, however, there are significant differences between Mormonism and other Christian denominations. Mormons were the dominant denomination of the Latter-Day Saint (or LDS) restorationist movement, which included a number of different groups whose origins can be traced back to Joseph Smith, Jr. ("Latter Day Saint movement," n.d.). Unique aspects of Mormonism included the belief that the Mormon Church is a restored (or reestablished) version of the same church that Jesus Christ originally founded, a belief in additional or supplementary books of scripture in addition to the Bible, a unique cosmology that includes belief in a pre-existence and in three levels or degrees of heaven, and a belief that God continues to make His will known through the President of the church, who is believed to be a modern-day prophet (for a summary of some of the differences between mainstream Christianity and Mormonism, see Appendix B).

The View from the Inside

John believed he had a good grasp of what kept Mormons in the faith, what factors often precipitated faith crises, and why questioning Mormon religious beliefs was often such a difficult and traumatic experience.

Most active participants in the Mormon Church, and particularly devout or orthodox members, sincerely believed in the validity of the church's claims. These claims included, but were not limited to, the following: 1) The Mormon Church, considered as an institution, was a restored version of the same church that Christ founded during his ministry, 2) The Mormon Church had unique authority to act in God's name—authority that no other religion or religious institution possessed, 3) Because of its unique position as God's official church, it had the power to grant or withhold certain privileges that would determine a person's standing in the hereafter, and 4) The president of the church was in direct communication with God in a fashion similar to other biblical figures generally recognized in the Christian tradition as prophets, such as Moses, or Abraham.

Individuals came to believe these claims through a process of religious conversion. Conversion began by becoming familiar with Mormon theology and the church's claims to religious truth. Individuals were then encouraged to investigate and determine for themselves if these claims were accurate by petitioning God directly and seeking confirmatory spiritual experiences. In this context, religious or spiritual experiences were defined in the usual way. These experiences included feelings of enlightenment, peace, compassion and/or love. In some cases, these feelings were accompanied by physical sensations, such as a burning in the chest, a tingling sensation in the spine, or tremors. In some cases, more subtle experiences, such as peace of mind, or a sense of "rightness" or "correctness" were also recognized as religious experiences. It was assumed that the question of whether or not Mormonism was "true" was answered in the affirmative by the manifestation of these experiences.

In Mormon jargon, the process of conversion was often described as "gaining a testimony" that the "church is true." For devout or orthodox Mormons, almost every aspect of their lives was viewed through the lens of Mormon theology. Mormons lived in a spiritual reality in which all of life's big questions—questions that humanity had struggled with for thousands of years, like "Where did we come from?" "What is the purpose of the life?" "What happens when we die?"—were answered in a relatively straightforward manner (Answers: We were the spirit children of God and lived with Him before we were born, the purpose of life was to learn to become like Him, and we would eventually return to His presence in one of three different "degrees" of glory).

Faith Crises

A few years after returning from his two-year mission, John was asked to teach a class on the history of the Mormon Church to a group of high school youth in his local congregation. He began studying church history in preparation for the class and was deeply unsettled by significant differences between the "official" history he had learned in Sunday school as a child and the accounts he uncovered from different sources in his own studies.

Mormons were taught that their spiritual lives should be an ongoing struggle to achieve a “knowledge” of the truth of Mormonism and that those who were persistent would eventually reach a point of spiritual enlightenment that would allow them to declare, with conviction, that the truth claims of the Mormon church were valid (or in Mormon vernacular, that they “knew that the church was true”). If one could not attain this degree of certainty, then it was acceptable to acknowledge doubt as long as it was in the context of an ongoing spiritual struggle to dispel it. It was not acceptable to recognize religious diversity and acknowledge that there might not be any definitive or universal answers to life’s perplexing questions. Giving up on the quest for spiritual certainty was generally viewed as a personal failing.

For many Mormons, questioning aspects of Mormonism had the potential to create a domino effect. After accepting the primary truth claims of the church, many Mormons then accepted all official church doctrine. Questioning certain beliefs, therefore, had the potential to undermine an individual’s entire religious belief system. One individual compared the experience of questioning his Mormon faith to an experience he had while snorkeling:

Some years ago, my wife and I went to Hawaii. It was an incredible experience. One of the things that I enjoyed the most was snorkeling. But the first time I went, I jumped into the ocean, and I began to look around, I kind of went into a panic. As I looked around, I could see that the bottom of the bay was about 30-50 feet down! It freaked me out a bit, and I had to calm myself down by reminding myself that I could swim, I wasn't going to sink. After a minute or so. . . I felt at ease, and could enjoy the beauty of the ocean. Leaving the church is very much like jumping into the ocean. At first, you feel like there's a void. . . .⁸

Depending on the events leading up to an individual’s crisis of faith, there was often a period in which the individual felt upset or angry—or felt like they had been defrauded in some way. This was particularly true in cases when a crisis of faith had been precipitated by the discovery of information that the individual felt the church had purposely withheld or obscured.

The second reason that Mormon faith crises were particularly challenging was that, in many cases, a shift in beliefs produced strong negative reactions from family, friends, and acquaintances. These individuals often felt that the questioning individual had betrayed them in some way. The following quote is from a Mormon mother whose daughter—who she refers to as Artichoke—had recently begun reevaluating her religious beliefs. She posted this comment on her public blog:

Though it seems like a long time since I learned that Artichoke was, in her words “disaffected” from the church, it has been only a few weeks. . . . I thought I was hearing dissatisfied, disturbed, upset. What she was saying was that she was repelled, and that she had withdrawn. . . . The thing that works best for me is to pretend that I did not hear those words. The only way to keep up the pretense is to be around Artichoke as little as possible. A part of me wants to sit her down and make her listen. I know that is not workable. She would run away to shut out my words. It is terrible to admit, but my feelings toward her have changed. I do not delight at the prospect of seeing her. I feel

uncertain and insecure in her presence. I feel betrayed. I still love her, but right now we have no common ground.

John knew from personal interaction with his audience than many of those that listened to his podcasts were currently experiencing (or had experienced) a variety of negative social consequences as a direct result of their faith crises.

John felt compelled to help fellow Mormons in the process of reevaluating their faith. A persistent dilemma, however, was how he should help. There was a broad spectrum of Mormon-related websites. These sites ranged from the "official" church sites (e.g. <http://www.lds.org>; <http://www.mormon.com>), to more balanced sites (referred to collectively as the Bloggernacle), to sites that were highly critical of the church and its practices (e.g. <http://www.exmormon.org>, <http://forum.newordermormon.org>, <http://furtherlightandknowledge.net>).

John knew he wouldn't be comfortable on either extreme of this spectrum. He had intentionally positioned the Mormon Stories podcast somewhere in the middle. John wondered if this positioning were the best way to help those dealing with a faith crisis, or if it were the most effective in terms of developing the Mormon Stories podcast. Although he was committed to a balanced approach to Mormonism, John believed that his exploration of difficult aspects of Mormonism through personal stories and experiences was relatively unique and had been important in helping develop a loyal and growing audience of listeners.

A recent exchange on the Mormon Stories podcast Community Facebook page made the case for how the podcast should differentiate itself:

Mormon faith crises take a greater toll on individuals, marriages, and families than do faith crises in almost any other faith. And it needs to stop, or at least be greatly alleviated. Take a struggling marriage where one spouse is still a believer and the other has become a non-believer. There's going to be immeasurable emotional turmoil. And there literally are no forums, no communities that exist for both spouses to join together to seek help and mutual understanding as a couple. The LDS church is not yet providing such a forum, and the disaffected groups aren't providing such a forum either. Who is going to step in and provide that forum, where a husband and wife, both believer and non-believer, can both come together to work through the turmoil they're experiencing?

That's the type of forum that the Mormon Story admins [administrators] want to create and maintain. I wholeheartedly agree that such a forum is desperately needed. And I wholeheartedly agree that guys like me who have felt burned by Mormonism (precisely because of that type of emotional turmoil), need to self-moderate our emotions, tone, and comments in these forums.

John wondered if this were the key to differentiating his efforts from other groups and blogs in the Bloggernacle? Could he create a space where Mormons in different places with respect to their beliefs could communicate effectively and work through the turmoil that often accompanied faith crises?

John couldn't help but wonder about how his organization's vision and mission would influence how he structured his non-profit. If he were to concentrate on building a digital archive of interviews, for example, that were helpful to the constant stream of Mormons questioning aspects of their faith, his business model would be scalable (in the sense that additional visitors would result in only a negligible increase in expenses). On the other hand, if he were to focus on a more traditional entertainment model, then he would constantly be judged by his last interview, and that would lead to a different organizational structure and a business model with different dynamics. Organizing local groups and sponsoring local conferences, or attempting to replicate his success with the Mormon Stories podcast by creating new podcasts would each require his organization to evolve in different ways and would be associated with a business model with different characteristics. "I'm beginning to see how a commitment to a particular vision and mission," John thought to himself, "has the power to shape the evolution of the organization in fundamental ways."

Mormon Stories: Problem or Solution?

Publically, he had always insisted that his intent was to help individuals experiencing a crisis of faith in Mormonism find reasons to maintain their affiliation with the church. He had written a lengthy essay entitled "How to Stay in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints After a Major Challenge to your Faith." He had recently revised and expanded the article and it was now publically available at a website called StayLDS (www.StayLDS.com).⁹

This essay was intended for those experiencing a crisis of faith in Mormonism and advocated a moderate or "middle-ground" approach between the extremes of strict orthodoxy and abrupt disaffiliation. After acknowledging the validity of different reasons for leaving the church, the essay outlined a number of reasons to stay and provided a lengthy list of different "reconciliation strategies." The essay concluded with some practical advice about how to interact with more orthodox members and how to conduct oneself in different situations in which unorthodox views might prove problematic.

John had thought about how individuals had reacted to his podcast. After receiving some inquiries about his efforts from the leader of his local Mormon congregation, he had put up a post on the Mormon Stories website asking listeners for feedback. He wanted individuals to describe their thoughts and feelings about the Mormon Church, what they felt the church was lacking or had failed to provide, and how the Mormon Stories podcast may have helped fill that void. Within a matter of days, he had received over a hundred single-spaced pages of comments, including the following:¹⁰

Mormon Stories has allowed me to think freely about Mormonism and its history and has given me opportunity to reflect upon the nature of my faith and then decide for myself how my faith should be shaped. . . . —David

What I feel is lacking in the church is a forum to ask questions without being made to feel that you are not applying enough faith. It isn't the knowledge of the history that causes pain, it's the fact that one can learn more in 10 minutes on Google about church history than in 30 years of church attendance. —Nathan

The church always caused me to look at the world in black or white and at my involvement as in or out. You are either active or inactive, obedient or disobedient, a believer or an apostate. The gift that John and Mormon Stories has given to me was at least having a third way to look at the church. –Jacob

As he scanned these comments, he felt gratified that his podcast had helped so many people. “But was it just a matter of helping people,” he wondered to himself. He had worried on several occasions that his podcast contributed as much to undermining faith in Mormonism as they did to preserve it. On some days, he thought of his efforts as the equivalent of standing on the street below a burning building and positioning mattresses to break the fall of unlucky occupants as they jumped from the windows. On other days, though, he wondered if he weren’t, at least in part, the equivalent of an arsonist that sets the building on fire and then shows up at the scene a while later with a few mattresses trying to be helpful.

A Middle Way?

John was familiar with the Pittsburgh Platform, a document authored in 1885 that had been associated with the institutionalization of a non-orthodox or “middle-way” approach to Judaism, and he had wondered, on more than one occasion, whether something similar could be done in Mormonism, although he had no interest in forming any sort of formal religious group.

Was he just sliding mattresses under people jumping from burning buildings, or was he trying to persuade people to approach Mormonism in a particular way? He knew that to outsiders this distinction might not seem significant, but for him it was an important question.

Although he had often been criticized by orthodox Mormons for his viewpoints, he had also been criticized by individuals who felt that he was too quick to defend the Mormon church and that his advocacy of a “middle-way” was naïve and ultimately impossible within a conservative organization that insisted on strict orthodoxy. Was his insistence that there was room for unorthodox Mormons in the Mormon Church realistic? Was it naïve?

Although he continued to advocate for “middle-way” Mormonism, John made it known in late 2011 that he and his family were no longer attending the Mormon Church on a regular basis (although they had not formally resigned). The potential effect of John’s level of activity in the Mormon Church on the Mormon Stories podcast was subsequently discussed on a number of bloggernacle sites.¹¹ The consensus seemed to be that there was little danger that the character or tone of the podcast would change substantially.

Long-Term Strategy

Because John had been primarily responsible for raising money for the foundation, he believed that he had a good understanding of what motivated individuals to contribute to the Open Stories Foundation. By the end of 2012, John estimated between five and seven hundred listeners had committed to making monthly donations. Most of these donations were in the range of \$5 or \$10

per month, although a number of donors had committed to \$100 per month, and a few had committed to \$1000 per month. One supporter, in particular, had donated substantial sums of money over the years and continued to do so.

John believed that most people donated because they had personally experienced a crisis of faith and had been helped by the podcast (i.e. they benefited from listening to the personal stories of other individuals that had had similar experiences) or had been helped by the community of podcast listeners (i.e. they had benefited from associating with other individuals who found value in the Mormon Stories podcasts). Donors were generally not concerned about whether or not individuals remained affiliated with the Mormon Church as much as they wanted to help others develop a stable and healthy spiritual life regardless of their ultimate decision regarding church affiliation or activity.

Total income in 2012 for the Open Stories Foundation was \$202,559.57 (compared to \$106,251.03 in 2011, see Appendix C). The majority of income was derived from direct public support of the Mormon Stories podcast (\$105,134.57). In 2012, John was paid \$53,890.51. In 2011, he was paid \$37,473.32, of which \$20,000 was for work done in 2010.

To date, John had been very careful to position his podcast in such a way that it would not be perceived as overly critical of the Mormon Church or Mormon theology. One way he had done this was to focus on the personal experiences of the individuals he interviewed and to avoid direct criticism of the Mormon Church as an institution. He wondered if he needed to think more systematically about how the Mormon Stories podcast was positioned relative to other sites in the Bloggernacle and/or relative to other Mormon-themed sites in general (see Appendix C for sample of Mormon-themed websites, blogs and podcasts).

In early 2011, John began setting up local Mormon Stories groups and holding regional Mormon Stories conferences. The first conference was in New York (in March), the second was in Salt Lake City (in June), and a third conference was held in Washington D.C. (in October). In 2012, additional conferences were held in Houston (in January), Phoenix (in February), Boise, Idaho (in March), Independence, Missouri (in April), Boston (also in April), Colorado (in May), Salt Lake (in June), New York (in September), Washington D.C. (in September) and in Seattle (in October).¹² These conferences, often attended by several hundred individuals, included formal presentations, roundtable discussions on different Mormon-related topics, and different social activities over a two-day period. They were organized around the notion that a group of people could be brought together for mutual support and spiritual enrichment based on their shared experiences in Mormonism and Mormon culture rather than on shared beliefs or a commitment to Mormon orthodoxy. As explained on the Mormon Stories website, these conferences:

... seek to be safe spaces where community members can express themselves authentically regardless of activity level in the Mormon Church or belief in any particular ideology. They do not attempt to persuade attendees to subscribe to any specific belief system or to make any particular life-decisions. Rather, they intend to be places where community members of disparate beliefs can gather together to share personal life experiences ("Mormon Stories Regional Conferences," n.d.)

In early January 2012, John had hired a general manager for Open Stories Foundation (see Appendix B, General & Administrative expenses). This manager was primarily responsible for maintaining local Mormon Stories groups and setting up regional conferences.¹³ By the time he received Margie's email in December 2012, there were more than fifty different groups based in different cities and regions in the U.S. and in a number of foreign countries.

John wondered if Mormon Stories website (and the Open Stories Foundation) could position itself as a kind of community hub for Mormons experiencing a crisis of faith and/or Mormons whose lack of orthodoxy make them feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in traditional Mormon circles. He envisioned that the Open Stories Foundation could provide direction and support and allow these local groups to use the Mormon Stories brand to promote local get-togethers and other activities. Although he had reservations, given the time and energy these groups required, and the challenges of controlling how the Mormon Stories brand was utilized, he wondered if the potential benefits of such an approach would be worth the effort.

Over the last few years, John had tried to replicate the success of the Mormon Stories podcast by finding other individuals to start related podcasts under the Mormon Stories brand. The longest running of these related podcasts was Mormon Matters, hosted by Dan Wotherspoon (mormonmatters.org). In 2012, John started several other podcasts, including Mormon Stories Sunday School (mormonsundayschool.org), A Thoughtful Faith (athoughtfulfaith.org) and Gay Mormon Stories (gaymormonstories.org). Under an agreement with the Open Stories Foundation, hosts of these podcasts were entitled to solicit (and keep) donations with the understanding that the content they produced would become the property of the Open Stories Foundation.

John felt like he had spent most of 2012 buried in operational details. He knew he needed to think strategically about the direction of the Mormon Stories podcast and the Open Stories Foundation. Should the organization's primary objective be the exploration of Mormonism through the personal experiences of others? What about entertaining his audience? Or should the organization focus on helping those who were experiencing faith crises? How did these different objectives fit together? He had spent the majority of 2012 focusing on local communities and on putting on local conferences. He sensed that the substantial increase in donations from 2011 to 2012 (see Appendix B) was primarily related to his increased focus on establishing local communities for those questioning different aspects of Mormonism. If this were the case, then should he interpret the increase in donations as an indication of what the strategic direction of the Open Stories Foundation should be?

Although John intended to continue to run the Mormon Stories podcast and to be actively involved in the Open Stories Foundation, it was important to him that he set up the organization so that it could, when the time came, continue to operate without him. John was currently a Ph.D. student at Utah State in the Clinical/Counseling/School Psychology program, and had yet to decide whether or not he would continue to be as deeply involved with the podcast and the foundation after he graduated in approximately two years. John felt that it was important for the foundation to pay him a salary would have been sufficient to hire someone to take his place if necessary.

It was now nearly 1:30 a.m. and John realized he needed to get some sleep.

He made a mental note, just before drifting off to sleep, to find a few minutes during the upcoming weekend to think more carefully about the future of the Open Stories foundation. He also reminded himself that he needed to respond to "Margie, in Portland" first thing in the morning.

Appendix A

Sample of Mormon-Themed Websites, Blogs & Podcasts

Official Sites (Maintained by Mormon Church)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

<http://www.lds.org>

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

<http://mormon.org>**Aggregator Sites:**

Mormon Archipelago

<http://www.ldsblogs.org>

Mormon Blogs

<http://mormonblogs.org>**Apologetic Sites:**

FAIR Blog: Defending Mormonism

<http://www.fairblog.org>

Mormon Apologetic Research Studies

<http://mormonapologeticstudies.org>**Bloggernacle Sites:**

A Bird's Eye View

<http://abev.wordpress.com>

Bloggernacle Times

<http://www.bloggernacle.org>

By Common Consent

<http://bycommonconsent.com>

Dave's Mormon Inquiry

<http://momoninquiry.typepad.com>

Doves & Serpents

<http://www.dovesandserpents.org>

The Exponent: Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?

<http://www.the-exponent.com>

Faith-Promoting Rumor

<http://www.faithpromotingrumor.com>

Feminist Mormon Housewives

<http://www.feministmormonhousewives.org>

Juvenile Instructor

<http://www.juvenileinstructor.org>

The Millennial Star

<http://www.millennialstar.org>

Modern Mormon Men

<http://www.modernmormonmen.com>

Mormon Expression

<http://mormonexpression.com>

Mormon Mentality

<http://www.mormonmentality.org>

The Mormon Women Project

<http://www.mormonwomen.com>

A Motley Vision

<http://www.motleyvision.org>

Times & Seasons

<http://timesandseasons.org>**Podcasts:**

Mormon Expositor Podcast

iTunes Store

Mormon Expressions

iTunes Store

Mormon FAIR-Cast

iTunes Store

Mormon Mom-Cast (LDS Talk)

iTunes Store

The Mormon Podcast: BCC Zeitcast

iTunes Store

Negative or Anti-Mormon Sites

Further Light & Knowledge (FLAK)

<http://furtherlightandknowledge.net>

New Order Mormon

<http://forum.newordermormon.org>

Recovery from Mormonism

<http://www.exmormon.org>

Appendix B

Comparison of Basic Beliefs of Mainstream Christianity and Mormonism

	Mainstream Christianity	Mormonism
<i>Religious Authority</i>	Bible (all), ecumenical councils and creeds (Catholic and Orthodox), official papal pronouncements (Catholic), continuing revelations (Pentecostal)	All sacred texts equally, continuing revelations
<i>Sacred Texts</i>	Bible (some include Apocrypha)	Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price
<i>Trinity</i>	Affirmed, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the "same substance," three persons in one being	Rejected, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct beings who are "one in purpose"
<i>God</i>	Trinitarian God, who does not have a body	Heavenly Father, who has a physical body
<i>Jesus Christ</i>	Son of God, Word of God, God, second person of the Trinity	Son of God, Savior, originally one of the spirit beings that all humans used to be, has a physical body.
<i>Holy Spirit</i>	God, Third Person of the Trinity	A spirit being who is a separate being from God and Jesus.
<i>Original sin</i>	Affirmed	Denied
<i>Free will</i>	Free will to do good is seriously impaired	Free to do good or evil
<i>Purpose of Christ's Incarnation</i>	Teach about God, provide a model for right living, die sacrificially for human sin, reveal God directly to humanity	Teach about God, provide a model for right living, die sacrificially for human sin
<i>Resurrection of Christ?</i>	Yes	Yes
<i>Salvation</i>	Both faith and works, faith emphasized (in most denominations)	Both faith and works, works emphasized
<i>Second chance after death?</i>	No	Yes, during a period of "learning and preparation" after death
<i>Afterlife</i>	Souls of wicked sent to Hell, believers go to Heaven for eternity, in Catholicism, many believers will suffer in Purgatory before going to Heaven	All spirits go to the spirit world, undergo preparation, then rejoin with bodies in the resurrection, the good spend the intervening time in spirit paradise, while the wicked go to spirit prison
<i>Hell</i>	Place (or state of being) of eternal torment and distance from God.	The wicked enter an unpleasant "spirit prison" prior to judgment; after that, only the most obstinately wicked (like Satan) will be consigned to "Outer Darkness" for eternity.

Adapted from ReligionFacts.com (see <http://www.religionfacts.com/mormonism/comparison.htm>)

Appendix C

2011 & 2012 Open Stories Foundation Financial Statements

Ordinary Income/Expense	2011	2012
Income		
Direct Public Support		
<i>Mormon Matters</i>	\$4,609.04	\$16,835.63
<i>Mormon Stories</i>	\$72,824.26	\$105,134.57
<i>OSF Conferences</i>	\$14,750.00	\$33,050.09
<i>Open Stories Foundation</i>	\$14,060.00	\$44,771.47
<i>Sunday School</i>	na	\$2,705.86
<i>Thoughtful Faith</i>	na	\$33.86
Total Direct Public Support	\$106,243.30	\$202,531.48
Interest Income	\$7.73	\$28.09
Total Income	\$106,251.03	\$202,559.57
Expenses		
General & Administrative		
<i>Payroll - General Manager (Anne Pepper)</i>	--	\$32,168.33
<i>Client Relations Management Software</i>	--	\$10,016.90
<i>Payroll Taxes</i>	--	\$6,549.92
<i>Travel</i>	--	\$5,000.00
<i>Other</i>	\$1,636.37	\$9,858.07
Total General & Administrative	\$1,636.37	\$63,593.22
Mormon Matters		
<i>Contract Services</i>	\$4,390.00	\$16,615.81
<i>Paypal Fees</i>	\$170.49	701.68
Total Mormon Matters	\$4,560.49	\$17,317.49
Mormon Stories		
<i>Payroll/Contract Services - John Dehlin</i>	\$37,473.32	\$53,890.51
<i>Contract Services - Other</i>	\$1,933.13	\$14.07
<i>Equipment, Subscriptions & Supplies</i>	\$4,366.93	\$4,527.73
<i>Meals</i>	\$1,234.40	\$1,531.60
<i>Misc</i>	\$676.14	\$3,144.09
<i>Paypal Fees</i>	\$2,954.05	\$4,814.08
<i>Payroll Taxes</i>	\$3,990.00	\$4,069.65
<i>Travel</i>	\$3,143.92	\$1,023.95
Total Mormon Stories	\$55,771.89	\$73,015.68
Open Stories Conferences		
<i>Catering</i>	\$2,850.43	\$6,166.91
<i>Contract Services</i>	\$5,379.02	\$1,940.80
<i>Facility Rental</i>	\$1,185.00	\$4,595.18
<i>Misc</i>	\$249.67	\$1,973.12
<i>Paypal Fees</i>	\$368.67	\$793.76
<i>Travel</i>	\$5,438.40	\$8,654.83
Total Open Stories Conferences	\$15,471.19	\$24,124.60
Open Stories Foundation		
<i>Paypal Fees</i>	--	\$16.30
Total Open Stories Foundation	--	\$16.30
Sunday School		
<i>Contract Services</i>	--	\$2,530.78
<i>Paypal Fees</i>	--	89.69
Total Mormon Matters	--	\$2,620.47
Total Expenses	\$77,439.94	\$180,687.76
Net Income	\$28,811.09	\$21,871.81

Assets	2011 31-Dec	2012 31-Dec
Current Assets		
Checking/Savings		
<i>Checking - Conferences</i>	\$13,157.99	\$3,752.77
<i>Checking - LGBT</i>	\$100.00	\$100.00
<i>Checking - Mormon Matters</i>	\$150.31	\$148.51
<i>Checking - Mormon Stories</i>	\$22,136.87	\$14,506.20
<i>Checking - OSF</i>	\$281.41	\$1,578.77
<i>Saving - Mormon Matters</i>	--	\$100.07
<i>Savings - Mormon Stories</i>	\$1,701.72	\$31,729.74
Total Checking/Savings	\$37,528.30	\$51,916.06
Other Current Assets		
<i>Paypal - Conferences</i>	\$267.02	\$0.81
<i>Paypal - Mormon Matters</i>	\$988.55	\$477.60
<i>Paypal - Mormon Stories</i>	\$9,868.46	\$17,014.49
<i>Paypal - OSF</i>	--	\$9.72
Total Other Current Assets	\$11,124.03	\$17,502.62
Total Current Assets	\$48,652.33	\$69,418.68
Fixed Assets		
<i>Furniture and Equipment</i>	\$1,172.01	\$2,277.47
Total Fixed Assets	\$1,172.01	\$2,277.47
Total Assets	\$49,824.34	\$71,696.15
Liabilities & Equity		
Equity		
Opening Balance Equity	\$21,013.25	\$21,013.25
Unrestricted Net Assets	\$28,811.09	\$28,811.09
Net Income	--	\$21,871.81
Total Equity	\$49,824.34	\$71,696.15
Total Liabilities & Equity	\$49,824.34	\$71,696.15

Appendix D

Epilogue

In January, 2013, John announced that he and his family were returning to full activity in the Mormon Church. During this same time period, the Open Stories Foundation, under John's guidance, abandoned its efforts to maintain local Mormon Stories groups and sponsor local conferences. John stressed that he remained committed to running the Mormon Stories podcast for the immediate future.

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Footnotes

¹ See <http://www.npr.org/people/2100593/terry-gross>

² See <http://www.pri.org/radiowest.html>

³ John was also employed as Utah State University's OpenCourseWare Coordinator and was the Director of the OpenCourseWare Consortium. A more complete bibliography is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Demlin.

⁴ A podcast is a digital file (or series of digital files) made available for downloading via the internet using a media player. Unlike other digital content on the internet, a user can subscribe to the series and new content will be automatically downloaded to the user's device as it becomes available.

⁵ As of 8/1/1012, the ABC News video segment in which John appeared could still be accessed online at <http://abcnews.go.com/Vodeo/playerIndex?id=3293104>

⁶ Wikipedia includes an entry on the "bloggernacle" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormon_blogosphere.

⁷ The official name of the Mormon Church is The Church of Jesus Crist of Latter-Day Saints. It is also often referred to as the LDA church. It is referred to throughout this document simply as the Mormon Church. For a particularly good introduction to Mormonism, see either of these recent books: Ostling, R.N. & Ostling, J.K. (2007). *Mormon America: The power and the promise*. HarperOne, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, New York and/or Riess, J. & Bigelow, C.K. (2005). *Mormonism for dummies: Your plain English guide to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*. Wiley Publishing, Hoboken, NJ.

⁸ There are a number of different sites where Mormons in different process of disassociating themselves from the church can share their experiences. This particular comment case be accessed at <http://www.exmormon.org/mormon/mormon325.htm>.

⁹ Here is a direct link to the essay *How to Stay in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints After a Major Challenge to Your Faith*: <http://staylds.com/docs/HowToStay.html>.

¹⁰ These comments are publically available at: <http://mormonstories.org/?p=1596>.

¹¹ The topic of John's participation in the Mormon Church was discussed in detail at: www.postmormon.org: http://www.postmormon.org/exp_e/index.php/discussions/viewthread/28352

¹² See <http://mormonstories.org/claendar/>

¹³ The updated list of Mormon stories Podcast Support Communities can be found at <http://mormonstories.org/local-communities/>.

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