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Peggy Fletcher Stack has been producing stories for The Salt Lake Tribune's award-winning Faith section for nearly two decades. Writing about contemporary faith, rituals, and spirituality as well as religion's conflicts and cohesion has always been Stack's passion. Follow her at facebook.com/peggy.fletcherstack, Twitter @religiogal
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Mormon writer who says church always caves to mainstream may be cast out

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Denver C. Snuffer Jr., a Utah lawyer and Mormon convert of 40 years, faces possible excommunication from the LDS Church on Sunday for writings that assert the Utah-based faith has fallen away from its founder's vision.

Unlike most earlier high-profile cases of church discipline against Mormon intellectuals, though, Snuffer is no liberal.

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In his book, "Passing the Heavenly Gift," Snuffer used the faith's signature scripture, the Book of Mormon, and founder Joseph Smith's "divine revelations" to analyze LDS history from Smith's death in 1844 to the present. He concludes that every Mormon prophet, starting with Brigham Young, caved to social, political and legal pressures to accommodate mainstream American society — starting with giving up polygamy, then becoming more corporate and eventually yielding to "social progressives" by softening language on same-sex attraction.

"Today, marketing the institution has become more important to Mormon success," Snuffer writes on the book's back cover, "than preserving the original religious content."

Snuffer insists his understanding of this sweep of history also comes from personal experiences with deity.

"The Lord does still personally appear to mankind. I am a witness to that fact. He first appeared to me February 13, 2003," he writes. "I know He lives. I have seen and spoken with Him."

In a letter dated Aug. 21, Sandy LDS Stake President Truman Hunt summoned the writer to a church disciplinary hearing, saying "the continued publication of 'Passing the Heavenly Gift' constitutes an act of apostasy."

The book "is not constructive to [the] work of salvation or the promotion of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ," Hunt writes. "The book's thesis is in direct conflict with church doctrine. In your effort to defend the restoration, you have mischaracterized doctrine, denigrated virtually every prophet since Joseph Smith, and placed the church in a negative light."

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The only way to avoid discipline, Hunt writes, is to discontinue the book's publication, to tell readers of Snuffer's blog that it "contains content that needs to be withdrawn," and to abort plans to discuss his views of Zion at a Boise lecture series next week.

Snuffer says on his blog, denversnuffer.blogspot.com, that he cannot do those things without breaking his commitments to booksellers and attendees who have already signed up for his lectures.

Snuffer intends to defend himself at Sunday's hearing, he tells The Salt Lake Tribune, but fully expects to be excommunicated.

"I think [my stake president] has received instructions to do so from downtown [LDS Church headquarters]," Snuffer says. "I believe the decision has already been made to excommunicate me."

LDS officials have said that church discipline is left to local leaders.

"I am not anxious to chase people out of the church," Hunt writes to Snuffer. "My goal is the opposite — to enable all to enjoy the blessings of the gospel."

Whatever the decision, Snuffer says it won't change his religious behavior.

If excommunicated, Snuffer would no longer be allowed to partake of the Mormon sacrament (like communion), have a position or speak at church, but he plans to continue attending church, living by the faith's precepts and prohibitions, including its health code forbidding alcohol, tobacco, coffee and tea.

"I have loved every minute of being a Mormon since I joined the church in September 1973 in New Hampshire," he says. "I am actually advocating activity and fidelity to the Mormon church."

All the father of nine wants, he says, is to alert Latter-day Saints about Smith's prophecies on the end times that they are unwittingly fulfilling.

"If the book ["Passing"] is true (and I am persuaded it is the most correct account of our dispensation written so far)," he writes on his blog, "then we need to awaken to our present peril and repent."

And Snuffer believes he has an obligation, given from God, to get that message out.

Peggy Fletcher Stack

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