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## Religious freedom: What's BYU life like for non-LDS professors, students?

By Deseret News | Nov 21, 1999, 12:00am MST  
Jeff Call sports writer

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PROVO -- When Emily Kromke arrived as a freshman at Brigham Young University, the campus might as well have been a foreign country. Though somewhat familiar with Mormonism before coming to Provo, the Florida native and member of the Catholic Church suffered a sobering case of culture shock.

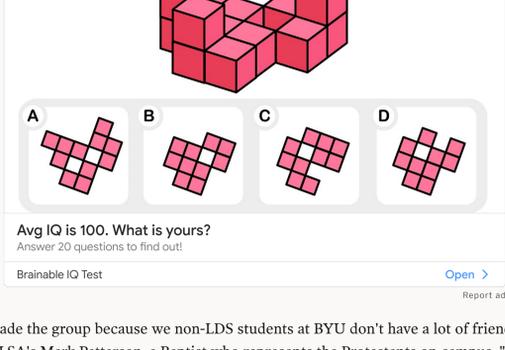
"It was extremely confusing when I first came," says Kromke, now a senior. "There were so many terms people spouted off, like 'wards,' 'stakes,' 'returned missionaries.' I had no idea what those terms were. Initially it was very difficult." The social culture was different from anything I had experienced before.

Of the 28,000 students enrolled at the LDS-owned school, about 600, or 2 percent, are non-LDS. Kromke says non-LDS students deal with everything from people presuming they are LDS to insensitive comments made in class about other religions to veiled and not-so-veiled attempts to convert them.

Most non-LDS students agree the most difficult part of being at BYU is fitting in socially. "At BYU, everything revolves around the ward and stake activities," Kromke says. "My solution was to spend time with other non-LDS students. I have quite a few LDS friends, but I feel more comfortable with non-LDS friends. . . .

"I never understood why ethnic groups hung out together so much until I came here and became a minority myself."

To help overcome those feelings of loneliness and confusion, non-LDS students formed the Non LDS Student Association at BYU six months ago. While there are a bevy of religious clubs on campus, including the Newman Catholic Club, the Muslim Student Association and the Baptist Student Union, the purpose of NLSA is to unify non-LDS students.



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"We made the group because we non-LDS students at BYU don't have a lot of friends," says NLSA's Mark Patterson, a Baptist who represents the Protestants on campus. "Dating is the roughest thing here. Most LDS girls, when they find out you're not LDS, want nothing to do with you."

Patterson, 27, is a graduate student in engineering and an eight-year Navy combat veteran. He enrolled at BYU after purchasing a house in Provo and after some persuading from an LDS woman he was dating at the time. Patterson found out quickly that BYU was a very different world. "In one of my first classes I was in, I was blackballed because I said I was not LDS," he says. "Only the teacher and a couple of students would even talk to me."

Of course for every story like that one, there are plenty of stories about non-LDS students who have a positive experience with the LDS community. Many end up joining the church. Still, the BYU administration is mindful of some of the challenges non-LDS students in general face.

Last spring, Patterson approached BYU President Merrill J. Bateman about some of the non-LDS students' concerns. "President Bateman said he was happy to see a group (NLSA) like this," Patterson said. "He was more than helpful. He gave us everything we asked for."

All students at BYU must take two hours of religion classes per semester to graduate. At the request of NLSA, administrators decided to allow a non-LDS section of a required Book of Mormon class. In addition, plans have been made to institute a "Non-LDS Awareness Week" on campus.

An increasing effort to accommodate the needs of non-LDS students was evident last spring when BYU set up a Student Athlete Center to serve non-LDS athletes. The school was worried about the number of non-LDS athletes being suspended for Honor Code violations. Paul Warner, who is LDS, was appointed to act as a chaplain for athletic teams. A sizeable portion of non-LDS students at BYU are athletes.

NLSA has about 60 members and started a "big brother" program, pairing seniors with freshmen to help the younger students acclimate to BYU's lifestyle. It holds activities like barbecues and trips to the bowling alley. "For a time, we weren't comfortable here," Patterson says. "We want to make BYU a better place for them."

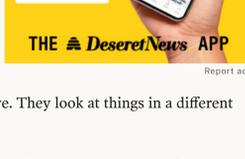
The vast majority of non-LDS students at BYU come from foreign countries, Patterson says. John Livingstone teaches Introduction to Mormonism, a class most non-LDS students take as freshmen. In his class this semester, he has pupils from Bulgaria, Germany, China, Africa, Central America and "a Jewish boy from Israel," Livingstone says. One student, a woman from El Salvador, was baptized recently. "There's no extra credit for joining the church," he jokes. "They are not required to believe what we believe, but they are required to know what's going on. I've found most students to be quite interested and attentive. Many of these students are not Christians."

A convert to the LDS Church himself, Livingstone can relate to the plight of non-LDS students. "I feel bad for some of these kids who are blindsided by the dating scene and by how devout we are," he says.

Reasons why non-LDS students attend BYU in the first place include its relatively inexpensive tuition and its academic reputation. BYU is also attractive to students who share LDS beliefs in abstaining from alcohol, tobacco and sex out of wedlock.

There is no quota in regard to the number of non-LDS students who are admitted to BYU, according to school officials. Religious affiliation "is not even a factor that is considered" in the admittance process, says Jeff Tanner, associate dean of admissions and records. "We are religious-blind," he says. "BYU's admission policy is nondiscriminatory. If a student agrees to abide by the Honor Code and meets academic requirements, they are candidates for admittance."

Tanner says the number of non-LDS students has decreased slightly in the 26 years that he has been at BYU. "We used to be about 4 or 5 percent," he explains. "The reason for that is the number of 18-year-olds who are members of the church have gone up from 50,000 to 90,000 in that time. We have a much larger pool of members."



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BYU benefits from having non-LDS students, Tanner adds. "We are an academic institution. It's nice to have heterogeneity in your student body. Non-LDS students come with a different perspective. They look at things in a different way. It adds a lot to classroom discussions."

Students are not the only ones who find themselves in the minority. Two non-LDS professors, Eula Monroe and Juliana Boerio-Goates, have written about their time on campus in a soon-to-be published book, "Finding God at BYU," a compilation of personal experiences that includes contributions from LDS faculty as well.

As of fall semester, of the 1,500 full-time faculty and visiting professors at BYU, 77 (5 percent) are non-LDS. Like students, faculty members must agree to abide by the school's Honor Code.

As a devout Southern Baptist from Kentucky, Eula Monroe never imagined she would wind up teaching at BYU, yet here she is. "It's the work of the Lord," she says, that brought the mathematics professor to BYU seven years ago. "I love it here, much to the surprise of my friends."

She says her faith has grown since coming to BYU. In "Finding God at BYU," Monroe, the only full-time faculty member who is Baptist, writes, "I am convinced that I stayed in Kentucky, the focus of my spiritual life would not have been as clear as it is today."

As part of her duties at BYU, Monroe is the faculty adviser for the Baptist Student Union, which has a small group of active members. Each week, the group meets for Bible study. But the group, founded at BYU 31 years ago, also serves as a support organization for students.

Adjusting to BYU wasn't too difficult for Monroe. "There was a lot to learn about the culture, but I had decided that if I came here, I would abide by the rules and the Honor Code, which isn't that much different from what I believe in," says Monroe, who like other non-LDS professors agreed when hired not to witness for her faith. "There are no difficulties as long as we treat each other with respect, as long as we stay away from talking about doctrine. . . . I have a great deal of love and regard for my colleagues and the administration."

Boerio-Goates is a chemistry professor who is Catholic. Because she is married to a man who is LDS (husband Stephen Goates teaches in the same department), Boerio-Goates has a unique perspective. "Many Mormons don't realize how pervasive the LDS influence is on campus," she says. "I very much like being at BYU, for the most part. When I was interviewed 17 years ago by (Elder) Paul H. Dunn, he was most concerned if I would be happy here rather than being concerned I'd follow the party line. I was impressed by that."

She has noticed there are fewer Catholics on campus than in years past and that the atmosphere is less comfortable for non-LDS students now than it was 20 years ago. "Every class is supposed to be 'taught with the spirit,'" Boerio-Goates says. "There's more of an emphasis on that. That is not a criticism. It becomes awkward when it's not your theology."

Still, she tries to let students know of her religious affiliation up front. "I make a joke on the first day of class that I'm 'coming out of the closet,' that I am not LDS," Boerio-Goates said. "I take time to discuss my beliefs. Students say they appreciate it."

Like Boerio-Goates, Kromke says being at BYU has strengthened her spiritually. Before coming to BYU, she went to church about once a month. Now, she is very active in her faith and has served as president of the Newman Catholic Club.

"BYU has made me a stronger person religiously. It has helped me to speak my mind," she says. Now as she is preparing to graduate, Kromke says she hopes non-LDS students have an easier time adjusting to BYU. "Non-LDS students are becoming more visible at BYU," she says. "Students realize that BYU is becoming more diverse."

Kromke has fended off numerous proselyting attempts by students and, after years of practice, knows how to avoid them. "I politely tell them I have my own faith," she says. "I wear a small cross the first couple of weeks the first part of every semester. I put ashes on my forehead on Ash Wednesday. I get some weird looks."

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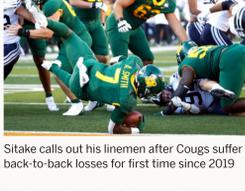


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