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Proxy baptism issue is resolved

LDS and Jews: The two groups reaffirm a previous agreement



By Peggy Fletcher Stack
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Jewish and Mormon leaders came to an amicable resolution Monday about the continued appearance of Jewish names on the LDS Church's genealogical index, used for the church's controversial practice of doing proxy baptisms for the dead.

Ernest Michel, chairman of the New York-based World Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, called the meetings "warm and satisfactory."

Essentially the two groups affirmed their 1995 agreement, in which The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints agreed to discontinue vicarious baptisms for Jewish victims and most other Jews as well as remove their names from the giant computerized International Genealogical Index - unless they are direct ancestors of current church members. They also created a joint oversight committee to be convened within six weeks that will explore reasons why the names keep popping up on the list.

Mormon leaders claim it is due to an unmanageably large list with billions of names and overzealous members who are not following church President Gordon B. Hinckley's directive to limit their submissions to those in their own family lines.

"My parents were baptized by the Mormon church. I am a Holocaust survivor who has strong feelings about this," Michel told reporters outside the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City. "I believe we have made progress which is important to survivors and to the Jewish community and to the [LDS] church."

In a proxy baptism, a living Mormon is baptized by full immersion in water in the name of a deceased individual. Such baptism is essential for salvation, they believe, but it takes effect only if the person accepts the ritual in the afterlife.

Several Jewish groups were incensed by the practice, suggesting similarities between medieval crusades to baptize them by force. Not wishing to offend, the LDS Church in 1995 removed nearly 400,000 names and data of Holocaust victims and gave them to various Jewish organizations, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Council in Washington D.C., the Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles and Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem.

But thousands of Jewish names that were deleted have reappeared on the list, said Salt Lake City researcher Helen Radkey. And many more new ones have appeared.

On Sunday, Radkey gave Michel 5,376 Jewish names on the church's list, of which she believes 3,416 are Holocaust victims. She found them by searching for last names "commonly used by Jews" and "a death date between 1942 and 1945."

"The bottom line is the [1995] agreement has not been kept," she said. "I'm skeptical of the problem being handled [with a new committee] because I've seen so much data. I

hope the decision is not just a political one."

David Elcott, director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, said the Jewish contingent was attacking the problem with computer and human legwork to identify families and names that should not appear on the index.

Mormons and Jews have reaffirmed their agreement several times since 1995. In 2002, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton met with Utah's Orrin Hatch to discuss the problem, although neither would discuss it publicly.

Concerns emerged again last fall after Michel hired Radkey to find Jewish names on the Mormon list. Michel expressed his frustrations in letters to LDS officials, who in turn invited him to meet this week for face-to-face discussion.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the church's high-ranking Presidency of the Seventy, extended the invitation to Michel and several colleagues, including his friend Herbert Kronish and Elcott. The group first met for a dinner at the Inn at Temple Square attended by LDS Apostle Boyd K. Packer.

On Monday, they had a sometimes painful but always "cordial and respectful" discussion, Christofferson said.

"We've always been able to talk candidly," Christofferson said. "The trust that's been there has been there since the beginning."

Elcott said the two faiths share a history of persecution for their beliefs. "That was incredibly important to our conversations. We understand each other in a fundamental way."

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The LDS Church's response to baptism by proxy concerns:

Excerpts from a Nov. 14, 2003 letter from Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the LDS Church's Presidency of the Seventy to Ernest W. Michel, executive vice president emeritus of the United Jewish Appeal-Federation of New York.

Signatories to the 1995 memorandum agreed that several steps described in that document, if undertaken by the LDS Church, would allay their concerns. Based on that understanding, the church has done the following:

* The names of nearly 400,000 persons identified as Jewish Holocaust victims were deleted from the church's International Genealogical Index (IGI), and the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors was so informed.

* Names and information identifying the Jewish Holocaust victims were gifted to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and other entities specified.

* In addition to the names of Jewish Holocaust victims, the church has removed from the IGI the names of other deceased Jews when "known or identified" to church officers; whenever the church has become aware of members submitting names of unrelated Jews for vicarious baptism in contravention of current church policy, it has

corrected them.

* The First Presidency issued a directive to church members not to submit the names of unrelated persons for vicarious baptism, and this policy continues to be incorporated in all relevant church literature.

As a demonstration of good will, the church has continued to honor requests to remove names of persons from the IGI who are known or identified to the church as Jews but are not ancestors of church members. It has done so not only where the name was entered after the date of the memorandum, but for pre-1995 entries as well.

The church did not agree to find and remove the names of all deceased Jews in the 400 million-name IGI. That would be an impossible undertaking.



