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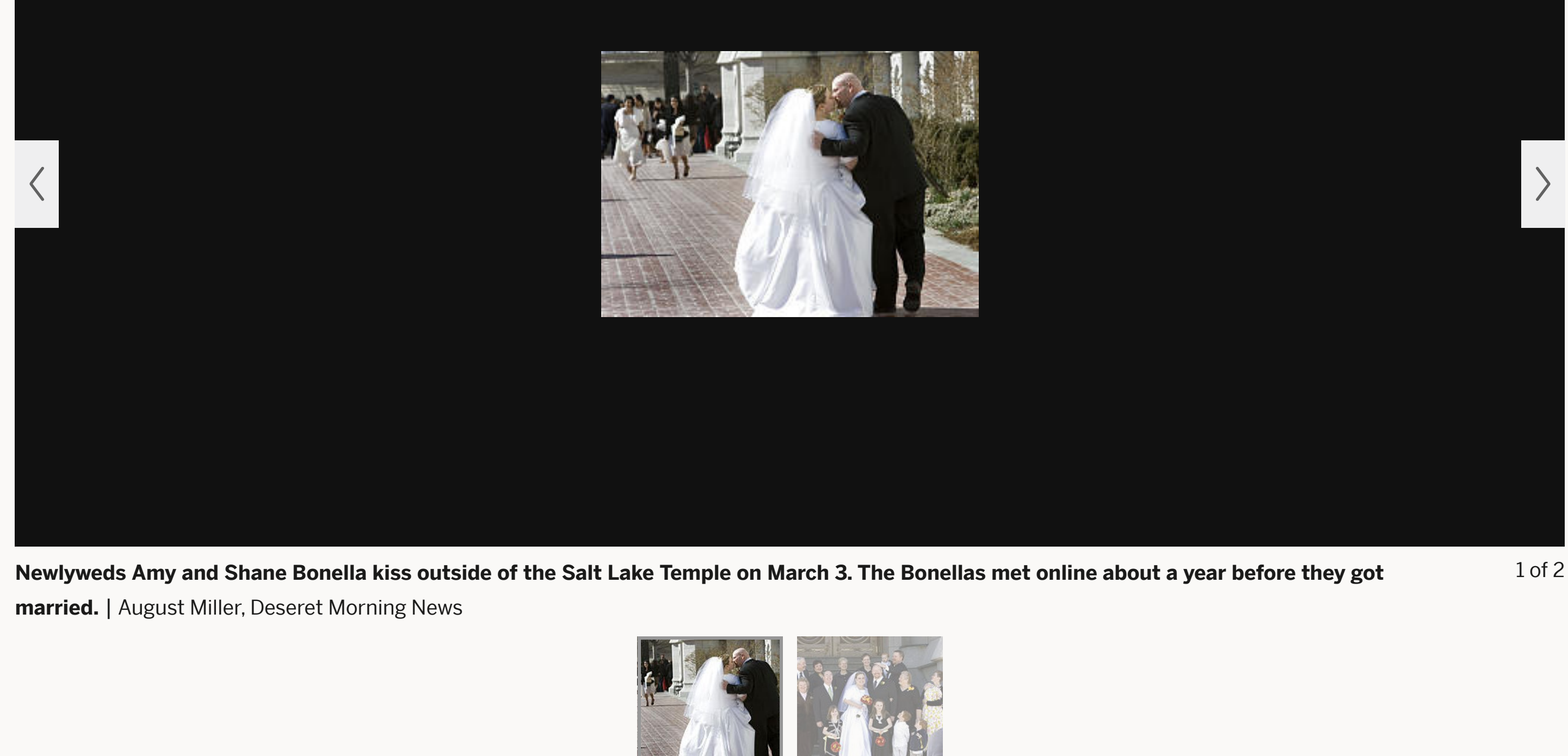
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LDS singles are delaying marriage

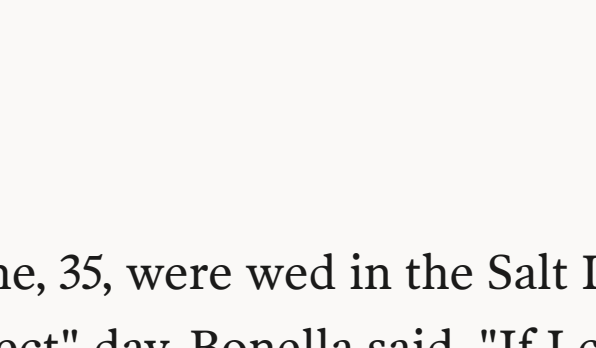
Growing trend mirrors national census data
 By Deseret News | Mar 31, 2007, 3:19pm MDT
 Nicole Warburton and Leigh Dethman

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GRID VIEW



Newlyweds Amy and Shane Bonella kiss outside of the Salt Lake Temple on March 3. The Bonellas met online about a year before they got married. | August Miller, Deseret Morning News



After all the bad dates, and some heartache, loneliness and despair, Amy Bonella finally did it.

She got married.

On March 3, Bonella, 32, and her new husband, Shane, 35, were wed in the Salt Lake Temple. It was a longed-for milestone and the "perfect" day, Bonella said. "If I could choose to relive a moment in my life, that would be the day, my wedding day," she said.

They had met online about a year before they married. It was a first marriage for both.

As Latter-day Saints prepare to hear from their top leaders during the 177th Annual General Conference this weekend, marriage will likely be among the topics du jour. But the demographics of the Bonellas' marriage illustrate something of a cultural shift for young members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, many of whom are delaying marriage longer than previous generations.

While no known published studies have been done about the age of first marriage in the LDS faith, both local LDS leaders and singles say more and more young Latter-day Saints are getting married at an older age.

The average age of first marriage for LDS Church members is approximately 23, said Jason Carroll, assistant professor of marriage, family and human development at Brigham Young University.

That may not sound old, but the LDS Church teaches that marriage and family are an important part of progression both now and in the afterlife. Young adults in the faith traditionally married as early as 18 during the last half of the 20th century.

Nationally, the average age of first marriage jumped from 20 for females and 23 for males in 1960 to 25 and 27 in 2000, respectively, according to the most recent Census data.

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If the present trend continues, some national demographers believe that fewer than 85 percent of current young adults will ever marry, according to the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University.

The study found that nationally, men don't commit because they want to avoid divorce and want to enjoy the single life. Foremost, it said the availability of sex outside the bond of marriage and enjoying the "benefits of having a wife by cohabitating" were the top reasons for delaying the commitment to marry.

No statistics about cohabitation rates are available for Latter-day Saints, who are taught abstinence before marriage and fidelity afterward.

"By and large, except for a few exceptions, an LDS emphasis on marriage and family during young adulthood is unique," both within society at large and in faith traditions as a whole, Carroll said.

For some Latter-day Saints like Bonella, the delay in marrying was not for a lack of trying. But church leaders say many singles appear to be following national trends of delaying marriage by avoiding traditional dates, such as a one-on-one evening, where a man calls a woman and asks her out.

Instead, singles are "hanging out" with members of the opposite sex in a group setting and searching the Internet for dates.

Top church leadership declined official comment for this story. But recent addresses to LDS faithful seem to indicate a growing concern about LDS young adults and marriage.

During spring commencement at BYU in 2005, Elder Earl C. Tingey, then a member of the presidency of the Seventy, called on singles to take on the adult responsibilities of marriage and family. He referred to an article in Time Magazine that called singles who avoid marriage "twentysomething Peter Pans" who never "grow up," preferring to play and work after college graduation.

Last October, LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley told BYU students that college was one of the best times to find a spouse. Earlier that month, during the general conference of the church, he urged males to get an education and catch up to women who are "exceeding young men in pursuing educational programs."

But perhaps the strongest example was a May 2005 talk by Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve. He gave what Carroll calls a landmark address about dating that "gave teeth" to observations that singles were not dating as their parents and grandparents had done, following national trends.

"The average age at marriage has increased in the last few decades, and the number of children born to LDS married couples has decreased," Elder Oaks said. He cited "cultural tides" such as divorce, and negative attitudes about child-bearing, as reasons for a decline in dating and postponement of marriage.

His counsel to young church members: "It's marriage time. That is what the Lord intends for his young adult sons and daughters."

Scott Stanley, co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies and a research professor of psychology at the University of Denver, said in an e-mail interview that he is "sure Mormons are following the trend in culture," as Elder Oaks suggested.

Stanley said studies show people are marrying later in life because of an emphasis on career and personal growth before marriage, and also a general fear of failure in marriage.

Aaron Wang, a 29-year-old engineer who left the LDS Church in his early 20s, said he sees no purpose in getting married at this point in his life. He lives with his girlfriend and considers cohabitation a precursor to marriage.

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"I've seen the unhappiness that marriage leads to at this age," Wang said. "I have friends who have done the marriage thing in their 20s, and they're getting divorces, and it's causing a lot of heartache. To me, it doesn't make a lot of sense."

According to Carroll, one out of three young adults in the United States agree with the following statement: "One sees so few good or happy marriages that one questions it as a way of life." Another study shows that about 62 percent of couples who get married in the United States live together before marrying to test the compatibility of their relationship.

LDS Bishop Jon Hale, who oversees a ward of LDS singles between the ages of 18 and 31, said he believes selfishness is the reason many singles postpone marriage. Instead of focusing on finding a spouse, many singles want to get an education, travel and "find themselves" before getting married, he said.

"When it comes down to it, the scriptures say that if a person will lose their life, they will find it," Bishop Hale said. "I'm so concerned that kids are trying to find their lives that they've lost it."

"Satan's done a good job misdirecting a lot of people," he said.

Other bishops also point to pornography, misplaced priorities, advances in technology and a shift in traditional gender roles, where women are now more dominant in both dating and educational pursuits.

Christian Crook, 29, said he has accomplished everything he wanted to do before getting married. He's traveled widely, finished graduate school and has a good job — yet he's still not married.

"I'd like to be married, but I'm OK being single and that's part of the problem. I'm comfortable," said Crook, who attends an LDS singles ward in Salt Lake City.

When asked if he was deliberately avoiding marriage, Crook said, "That's what the empirical evidence would suggest." Minutes later, he added, "I'll get married when I'm good and ready."

Caprene Thompson, 31, said she has tried to focus her life on service, filled with interesting, fulfilling activities and people. She's been engaged and has had several serious relationships, but none has resulted in marriage.

"I'm not sad and depressed," Thompson said about her single status. "I do want to get married. I do look very much forward to having children and family. And I am happy to give up career when it does happen. But now I have to live life and support myself and not just sit around."

For singles like Thompson and Crook, local church leaders say the best advice they can give is to not get overwhelmed if they're not married yet, and to "lose themselves" in service, friendship and wholesome activities.

But leaders say singles shouldn't stop looking for a marriage partner, either.

"You know better. You have been better trained," Elder Tingey told BYU graduates in 2005. "You have an eternal view of life that helps you see beyond and through the shallowness and emptiness of allowing a self-centered adolescent period following college graduation.

"We expect more from you."

E-mail: nwarburton@desnews.com, ldethman@desnews.com

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