Study portrays Mormons as outsiders looking in

by [Daniel Burke](#)
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(RNS) In some ways, Mormonism is the ultimate American religion. Born in America, it was unveiled by an American prophet who believed the Constitution was divinely inspired and the Garden of Eden bloomed in Independence, Mo.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown from six members gathered around a charismatic New Yorker named Joseph Smith in 1830 to nearly six million believers in the U.S. alone. Richard Ostling, a religion expert and co-author of the book "Mormon America," calls it "the most successful faith ever born on American soil."

But even as a devout Mormon leads the GOP field for the presidential nomination and the award-winning musical "Book of Mormon" plays to overflow crowds on Broadway, a new survey portrays Mormons as strangers in their own land.

The vast majority of Mormons believe that Americans do not embrace Mormonism as part of mainstream society, and most say Americans know little about their religion. More than half worry about discrimination, according to a survey released Thursday (Jan. 12) by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

"Clearly this is a population that sees itself as outsiders looking in," said Gregory Smith, a senior researcher at the Pew Forum.

The survey -- called the first of its kind conducted by a non-Mormon organization -- interviewed 1,000 American Mormons between Oct. 25 and Nov. 16, 2011, by telephone, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

"I wish the public could see us for our day-to-day doctrines, devotions and practices, which are just like other devout religions," said George Robinson, 63, a cardiovascular surgeon and local LDS leader in Gadsden, Ala. "Instead, the public either hears pejoratives about us, or focuses on differences, many of which are rarely brought up as part of our religion."

Still, Robinson and many other Mormons remain upbeat, saying that American attitudes toward their faith are changing for the better.

Nearly nine in 10 Mormons say they are happy with their lives and judge their communities as excellent or good places to live. More than half say the country is ready for a Mormon president.

But most Mormons also say that popular entertainment damages their public image. In recent years, a number of TV shows, such as HBO's "Big Love" and TLC's "Sister Wives" have featured polygamous families who belong to offshoots of Mormonism. According to the Pew survey, 86 percent of Mormons believe that polygamy, which the LDS Church banned in 1890, is morally wrong.

Perceptions of anti-Mormons animus are likely also fed by the presidential candidacy of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, despite his front-runner status.

While three in four Mormon voters identify as Republican or lean conservative, less than 40 percent believe the GOP is friendly towards Mormons, the Pew survey found. The hostility directed at Romney's Mormonism by some evangelicals -- a key GOP constituency -- reinforces that perception, Smith said.

Most evangelicals do not believe Mormonism falls within the Christian fold, according to a separate Pew poll, and some have been outspoken about opposing Romney's candidacy on those grounds. Half of Mormons, according to the Pew survey released Thursday, pick up an unfriendly vibe from evangelicals.

"It's frustrating that some people are trying to build a hedge of deceit around the church so that people won't decide to take a look for themselves and find out what our church is all about," Robinson said.

Most Mormons do not deny the differences between their faith and mainstream Christianity, the survey found. While 97 percent of Mormons believe their faith to be a Christian religion, less than half say it is similar to Catholicism or evangelical Protestantism.

And yet, Mormons remain firm in their religious commitments, even to practices and beliefs that set them apart from mainstream Christianity.

For example, 94 percent believe that the president of the LDS Church is a prophet of God, and that ancient prophets wrote the Book of Mormon. Nearly the same percentage believe that families can be eternally bound in temple ceremonies, and that God the Father and Jesus are separate beings. (Traditional Christianity calls them unified, along with the Holy Spirit.)

"Mormons want acceptance, but not assimilation," LDS spokesman Michael Otterson wrote in The Washington Post on Thursday. "No church leader I have ever heard preach has suggested that Mormons should drop their distinctiveness -- the very characteristics that the Pew study identifies -- in order to become more popular with the world at large."

In fact, Mormons are among the most committed religious groups in America, according to the Pew survey. More than 8 in 10 say they pray daily; three-quarters attend weekly religious services; and 82 percent say religion is very important in their lives. Only Jehovah's Witnesses approach Mormons' religiosity, Smith said.