

Mormons warned against baptizing Holocaust victims

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The LDS Church's governing First Presidency has issued an unequivocal mandate to its members: do not submit names of Jewish Holocaust victims or celebrities for proxy baptism. Doing so could cost Mormons access to their church's genealogical data or even their good standing in the faith.

"Without exception, church members must not submit for proxy temple ordinances any names from unauthorized groups, such as celebrities and Jewish Holocaust victims," Mormon President Thomas S. Monson and his counselors wrote in a letter to all Mormon bishops, dated February 29.

"If members do so, they may forfeit their New FamilySearch privileges [access to the church's genealogical holdings]. Other corrective action may also be taken." The letter, which was to be read over pulpits and posted on bulletin boards in every Mormon congregation on March 4, reminds members that their "preeminent obligation" is to their own ancestors, and any name submitted for proxy rituals "should be related to the submitter."

The crackdown could help LDS officials put an end to overzealous Mormons sidestepping the rules or mischief makers bent on embarrassing the faith.

The Mormon practice known as "baptism for the dead" involves living people being baptized on behalf of their dead relatives. Mormons believe that it is their moral obligation to do the temple rituals, while those in the hereafter can either accept or reject the ordinance.

In the early 1990s, Jewish representatives complained about the practice, arguing that it disrespected Jews who died in the Holocaust. Mormon leaders agreed to remove them from the list of candidates for baptism, unless they were related to living church members.

The task, however, proved difficult, and many of the Holocaust names continued to pop up in the database. In 2010, the Mormons assured Jews that a new computer system would help solve the problem.

But the issue exploded again in recent weeks as reporters published accounts of proxy baptisms for several well-known figures, including the deceased parents of famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal and slain *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl.

The LDS Church leaders reacted swiftly and decisively to the news, issuing an apology and saying in several cases that they had removed the submitters' access to their genealogical records. "We consider this a serious breach of our protocol," spokesman Scott Trotter said in a statement, "and we have suspended indefinitely this person's ability to access our genealogy records."

Steps taken by Mormon authorities also have blocked a prominent whistle-blower from accessing the Mormons' database that chronicles baptisms for the dead. Utah researcher Helen Radkey, whose baptism discoveries have embarrassed the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for decades, said: "I have been effectively stopped."

In a statement, Abraham Foxman, national director of the New York-based Anti-Defamation League, welcomed the hard line from Mormon leaders. "Church members should understand why proxy baptisms are so offensive to the Jewish people, who faced near annihilation during the Holocaust simply because they were Jewish, and who throughout history were often the victims of forced conversions," Foxman said.

—RNS