

Mitt Romney on the cusp of making major Mormon history

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c. 2012 The Salt Lake Tribune WASHINGTON (RNS) With Rick Santorum's exit from the White House race, Mitt Romney stands on the cusp of history as the first Mormon to appear at the top of a major party ticket in a general presidential election. Romney, a Brigham Young University-educated, Mormon-family scion and beloved Utah figure, is now the inevitable Republican nominee and will take on President Obama this fall.

The news is sure to bring a surge of excitement unseen in Utah since Romney led the triumphant 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City and helped usher the state -- and the Mormon Church -- onto the world stage.

"Romney has family here, he's lived here, he's worked here, he went to school here," says Rep. Jason Chaffetz, a Utah Republican who has campaigned this year with the former Massachusetts governor. "It feels like he's one of us."

He is the seventh Latter-day Saint to attempt a presidential bid -- six others, including former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman this year, and church founder Joseph Smith in 1844, fell short.

Many Latter-day Saints feel connected to Romney, says Darius Gray, former head of the Genesis Group, a support organization for black Mormons, and others will believe that "Mormonism has arrived."

For so long, Latter-day Saints have had a "sense of being the underdog, due to our history and persecution we've experienced in our 182-year history," Gray said. "For some, (Romney's nomination) will be a kind of vindication. But with it will come great scrutiny about who we are as a people."

Gray's advice to Mormons: Don't overreact to questions about the faith's past and its present.

"We should not be thin-skinned," he said. "It will behoove all of us at all levels to be prepared to answer well and fully questions that are bound to arise."

Regardless of the fallout, Gray looks forward to "an interesting confrontation between visions of the future -- that of Brother Romney and that of President Obama."

Romney's quest for the Oval Office already has seen rumblings of anti-Mormon sentiment carry over to the ballot box. He lost much of the evangelical-dominated South. Some prominent pastors have dismissed Mormonism as a cult. Others have questioned the faith's exclusion of full membership for African-Americans until 1978.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is likely to see more scrutiny than it did during the Olympics -- now through a political lens. Ben Park, a Mormon doctoral student at the University of Cambridge in England, said Mormons will face a host of new perspectives.

"Prior to this," Park wrote in an email, "it's only been evangelicals and the religious right. ... This will be the first time they confront thoughtful secular criticisms -- the kind that can't be shrugged off as anti-Mormon bigotry and will actually cause reflection."

That may prompt a bit of a pause with some of the Mormon faithful, who find themselves hopeful for a candidate but also wary of the spotlight.

"There is a curious mixture of excitement and apprehension among Mormons, whatever their political persuasion," said Mormon writer and blogger Jana Riess in Cincinnati. "We are hyperaware of our minority status in America and concerned that increased public scrutiny of our faith will prove painful."

However faith surfaces in the fall campaign -- Obama's team has said Romney's Mormonism will be off-limits despite GOP allegations that it won't be -- the candidate's newfound stature pushes the LDS faith into a new political stratosphere.

Romney's nomination is "the outcome of the many changes to Mormonism since World War II," says Jan Shipps, a respected historian of American religions. "It is a key episode in the life of the Utah-based faith."

That's true even for non-Romney supporters.

State Sen. Ben McAdams, a Salt Lake City Democrat and devout Mormon, conceded that having a Mormon presidential nominee is an exciting prospect that will create national exposure for the church.

"I've long maintained that as America gets to know my faith, they'll find a lot of virtue and value in who we are, and we have a lot in common with the American people, and we have a lot to bring to the table," McAdams said. "As Americans will learn during the course of this campaign, Mormons are mainstream America."

McAdams says he wants a Mormon as president -- though he doesn't want Romney to be that Mormon.

Nationally, nine in 10 Mormons (86 percent) in the GOP-dominated faith give Romney positive marks, according to a poll by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life earlier this year. Even 62 percent of Mormon Democrats have a favorable view of their fellow believer.

Shipps, who is writing about post-World War II Mormonism, is now waiting to see how the presidential showdown ends.

"I can't finish my book," she said, "until this plays out."