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Mormons open temple doors to share beliefs

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

One of the hottest tickets in New York right now is just off Broadway: a tour of a new Mormon temple. It's a rare glimpse of the architecture of a unique, often-misunderstood religion, a sense of the sacred expressed in light and mirrors and enveloping silence.



The new Mormon temple in New York City will hold tours until June 5.

By Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

Among highlights: a baptismal font resting on the backs of 12 life-size statues of oxen and shimmering white rooms that on each floor become progressively whiter, evoking a celestial glow.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the name Mormons prefer) will formally dedicate its new temple June 13, and after that it will be closed to unbelievers.

But the tours, free to 56,000 people who nab the dwindling reservations, are part of the church's ceaseless effort to reach past those closed doors to gain respect if not converts.

It surprises even New Yorkers that 42,000 Mormons live in the metro area. Inside a bland, white stone box of a building at 65th and Columbus, across from Lincoln Center, there's been a meeting house serving local Mormon congregations since the 1970s.

Expect those numbers to soar. Temples and converts, like chickens and eggs, each prompt the other. In 2000, there were only 50 temples worldwide. New Yorkers hauled to Boston, where a temple opened in 2000, or to suburban Washington, D.C., where the first temple east of Salt Lake City opened in 1974.

There are now 12 million Mormons, all encouraged to visit a temple at least once in a lifetime to experience "the crowning blessings the Church has to offer," says the church's 15th president and prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley.

By the numbers

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter

Realizing this can mean a long, costly journey for many in the Third World or the inner city, Hinckley launched a multimillion-dollar building blitz to bring the temples to the people. So far, 69 new temples have opened in the last

Day Saints (Mormons):

- 12 million members worldwide in January 2004 up 33% from 1994 and climbing at a rate of more than 900 members a day.
- 5.5 million in the USA, 2.8 million in South America and 1.5 million in Mexico and Central America in 2003.
- 119 temples operating in 40 countries including one in Copenhagen to be dedicated this month and 56 in the USA when the Manhattan temple is dedicated in June.
- Four temples under construction including: Aba, Nigeria; Helsinki, Finland; Newport Beach, Calif., and San Antonio.
- Five temples announced including ones in Rexburg, Idaho and Sacramento.
- 55,000 missionaries, trained in 50 languages, in 2004.

Source: *Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

four years, including one in Copenhagen to be dedicated May 25 and the Manhattan temple. All are mortgage- and debt-free, paid for by tithes and LDS Church investments, and served entirely by volunteers who preach, teach, sweep up the trash and launder the special baptismal robes.

Mormons are baptized in chapels or meeting houses where members and potential converts worship on Sundays. But only a temple will do for key LDS rituals: being "sealed" in marriage for eternity, offering blessings to prior generations and receiving "endowments" (teachings on the nature of God, man, human experience and the universe). These sacraments require members-only privacy because they are the most sacred — and most often misunderstood and attacked.

Christians who say the Bible is God's final revelation object to the Mormon belief that founding prophet Joseph Smith received a third testament from Christ, the *Book of Mormon*, transcribed in 1830 for the Latter-day Saints.

Many people associate Mormons with the church founders' polygamous practices, which has been banned since 1890, stereotype its devotion to family self-sufficiency as clannish paranoia and view proxy baptisms as insulting their ancestors' faith.

From its earliest days, secrecy, which also might be considered a sort of sacred privacy, has been a hallmark of the church. Launched in western New York, it was driven ever westward until Brigham Young settled believers in desert isolation near the Great Salt Lake.

Temple tours, however, allow the church to offer a graciously and carefully controlled look at its beliefs and practices. At the Manhattan temple, the refurbished meeting house, gym, social hall and offices remain in the building, sandwiched on two floors and distinctly separate from temple

areas. Highlights of the four temple floors:



Intellectual Reserve, Church of Latter-day Saints

The Celestial Room, this one in the New York temple, is an elegantly furnished sitting room for the faithful.

- The baptismal font is sunk into a platform supported by oxen statues representing the 12 tribes of Israel. The font will be chiefly used by teenagers who take on the honor of baptizing ancestors. Blessing by proxy is "a choice, a free-will offering to a (non-Mormon) ancestor whose consciousness as an individual continues in the next life," explains church spokesman Dale Bills. It's not an imposition, insult or posthumous conversion.

- Furnishings and art echo Mormon belief, history and culture — mixed with a touch of New York. Beehives, the emblem of ever-busy Mormons working together, decorate the oak doors that have hardware resembling Lady Liberty's torch. Even the upholstery tacks are embellished with tiny beehives or torches. Artwork chiefly features either Christ or landscapes to emphasize the beauty of creation.

- As believers ascend in knowledge, commitment and spiritual maturity, so rooms on each floor are progressively whiter and brighter. Architect Frank Fernandez used three different white paints, each more luminous, for three

temple levels, and the recessed lighting and enormous chandeliers make rooms twice as bright as ordinary rooms.

- The highest rooms have facing mirrors to offer visions of eternity.

The prospect of this oasis of silence and beauty two blocks from her house thrills Jennifer Buckner. No longer must she and her husband load up their four young children for a weekend dash to a temple a few times a year.

"Now we can get a sitter and go over to the temple for a few hours," she says. "Whether you are there for yourself or helping others, you are in an incredibly peaceful place. I love the idea of peace in the center this crazy wild city."

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