

A Top Mormon Leader Acknowledges the Church 'Made Mistakes'

By Laurie Goodstein

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One of the top leaders in the Mormon Church acknowledged in an address to the church's global membership on Saturday that past leaders had "made mistakes" that had caused some Mormons to have doubts, an admission that amounts to a significant change in tone in the leadership's approach to Mormons who question, dissent or defect from the church.

"We respect those who honestly search for truth," President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, second counselor in the church's top governing body, the first presidency, said in the speech.



Dieter F. Uchtdorf in 2010. Keith Johnson/Deseret News, via Associated Press

The church has in the past excommunicated prominent scholars and even low-profile members who publicly voiced doubts about its history or theology, and many Mormons who have lost their faith have been shunned by their friends and family. But recently, with some Mormons taking to the Internet to share their doubts, leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which now claims 15 million members, have been confronted with a bigger problem they could no longer ignore.

“We openly acknowledge that in nearly 200 years of church history — along with an uninterrupted line of inspired, honorable and divine events — there have been some things said and done that could cause people to question,” Mr. Uchtdorf said, speaking to 20,000 Mormons gathered for the 183rd semiannual general conference in Salt Lake City, and millions more watching telecasts and over the Internet.

On Saturday evening, about 200 women, according to The Associated Press, staged a demonstration outside to protest the church’s male-only priesthood, demanding entrance to a men’s-only priesthood meeting.

Mr. Uchtdorf, a Mormon from Germany who is considered by those who study the church to be a potentially modernizing influence, did not specify what leaders or mistakes he was referring to.

But he said: “To be perfectly frank, there have been times when members or leaders in the church have simply made mistakes. There may have been things said or done that were not in harmony with our values, principles or doctrine.”

He said it was wrong for other Mormons to assume that those with doubts “have been offended or lazy or sinful.” He said that the church “honors personal agency,” and that the church’s first prophet, Joseph Smith, “had questions and sought answers.”

Scott Gordon, president of FAIRMormon, a group that defends the church, said: “I believe this is the clearest statement made in recent times that church leaders have made mistakes in the past. Coming from a member of the first presidency, the highest level of leadership in the church, makes it especially powerful.”