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Mormons feel misunderstood but say their religion is gaining acceptance

Carol Zimmermann Catholic News Service | Jan. 13, 2012

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints gather around the Mormon Salt Lake Temple in early April 2011 in Salt Lake City. According to a new Pew Forum poll, most Mormons feel their religion is not well understood but say people are becoming more tolerant of their beliefs. (CNS photo/George Frey, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- Mormons in the United States might be getting more attention these days, but they have mixed views on what this attention means.

According to a new Pew Forum poll, most members of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints feel that Americans don't know enough about their religion, but they also think the public perception of them is becoming more positive.

The study, "Mormons in America: Certain in Their Beliefs, Uncertain of Their Place in Society" was conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and released Jan. 12. It was inspired by recent articles about the religion being in the spotlight dubbed the "Mormon moment."

This spotlight refers to two Mormon Republican presidential candidates, Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman; a Broadway musical about Mormons called "The Book of Mormon"; the recent HBO series "Big Love" about a fundamentalist Mormon family, and the hype over the "Twilight" vampire series written by Mormon author Stephenie Meyer.

A Newsweek article last summer said that despite the "sudden proliferation of Mormons in the mainstream, Mormonism itself isn't any closer to gaining mainstream acceptance."

That statement struck a chord with the Pew researchers who told reporters in a Jan. 12 teleconference that they were determined to figure out what Mormons -- who make up 2 percent of U.S. population -- think about their place in American life, what they think about other religions and what they find essential to leading a good life.

And in their 125-page report they found some answers: Forty-six percent of U.S. Mormons say they face a lot of

discrimination and six in 10 Mormons think Americans are uninformed about their religious beliefs. Sixty-three percent of Mormons also think Americans are "becoming more likely to see Mormonism as part of mainstream society," and 56 percent feel the country is ready for a Mormon president.

Mormons also overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction with their lives and contentment with their communities.

The survey of more than 1,000 Mormons was conducted between Oct. 25 and Nov. 16, 2011, by landlines and cellphones and has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points.

The poll noted that the general public commonly chooses "cult" as the word to describe Mormonism, but researchers were quick to point out that other words were also used such as family, family values and committed.

Although 97 percent of Mormons say their religion is Christian, about one-third of Americans disagree and 17 percent of Americans "don't know" how to answer that question. Half of evangelicals do not believe that Mormons are Christian.

The poll shows that Mormons share many of the religious practices and beliefs of traditional Christianity and their numbers are even higher in terms of church participation than members of some other faiths.

For example, 77 percent of Mormons say they attend church at least once a week, compared to 41 percent of Catholics, and 69 percent show a high level of religious commitment compared to 27 percent of Catholics.

The study shows that a number of tenets central to the teachings of the Mormon faith are not shared by other Christian traditions including beliefs that:

-- The president of the church is a prophet of God.

-- The Book of Mormon was written by ancient prophets.

-- Families can be bound together for all eternity in temple ceremonies.

-- God the Father and Jesus Christ are separate, physical beings.

Despite these beliefs, Mormons are divided over whether they are similar or different from other faiths. When asked about how their faith compares to Catholics, 46 percent of Mormons said the two faiths are somewhat similar to each other, while 50 percent said the two faiths are very or somewhat different.

By contrast, an August 2009 Pew Research Center poll found that 22 percent of American Catholics said that Mormonism and their own religion are very or somewhat similar, while 59 percent of Catholics described their faith and Mormonism as very or somewhat different.

Politically, the current survey shows two-thirds of Mormons consider themselves conservative politically, and 75 percent support Republicans over Democrats.

The study's researchers pointed out that Romney is not a favorite among evangelicals, which could be a factor in the Republican presidential campaign, but they said this could be less of an issue if he becomes the Republican nominee as evangelicals have been vocal in their opposition of President Barack Obama.

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