

Warren Jeffs profile: Thou shalt obey

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AS PRINCIPAL OF ALTA ACADEMY FOR 22 YEARS, Warren Jeffs was a stickler for the little things. Sloppy handwriting, an untucked shirttail, a bad grade -- all were signs of a personal flaw that needed to be confessed, corrected and often punished. Now, as president of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the scope of his dominion has grown from 300 students in the Salt Lake Valley to 10,000 people on the Arizona Strip.

His discipline has hardened into law, and his goal is perfection on earth. To err is to risk one's eternal salvation.

"I believe Warren is trying to accomplish something that even God hasn't heretofore," said a close associate. "To be able to pull together a captive group of followers who are measured by a mortal man as being perfectly united in mind and body and purpose."

NEVER A PUBLIC MAN, Jeffs, 48, exercises power over his people from a walled compound on Utah Avenue in Hildale. Outside, there are whispers about why he recently exiled so many men, whose families might be scattered next, and whether a wholesale decampment to Mexico is in the works.

Loyalty seals his followers' lips. Many people who have been kicked out won't speak, for fear of ending any hope of rejoining the faith and their families. And those who abandoned the church long ago worry that talking freely could cause trouble for relatives still under Jeffs' rule.

FLDS attorney Rod Parker didn't bother to ask Jeffs if he would consent to an interview with The Salt Lake Tribune. "He has never given one," he said. Even Utah Attorney General Mark Shurtleff has been rebuffed in his attempts

to meet with Jeffs.

That leaves mostly critics and those wounded by Jeffs' actions to offer an unflattering, and incomplete, portrait of the man many consider their unerring prophet.

The church he heads is one of Utah's largest, and most insular, fundamentalist faiths that follow early teachings of LDS Church founder Joseph Smith, including plural marriage.

Jeffs assumed leadership of the FLDS church in 2002 after the death of his 92-year-old father, Rulon Jeffs.

But he has helped shape the sect for many years, first as an educator, then as spokesman for his ailing father and now as its leader.

JEFFS GREW UP IN THE SALT LAKE VALLEY, the second son of his father's fourth -- and favored -- wife, Marilyn Steed, and one of dozens of full and half-siblings. He graduated from Jordan High School in 1973, one of nine seniors who placed in the top 3 percent of the class.

As a youth, Jeffs came across as "humble and righteous" — but also willing to rat out others' mischief. A fleeting, "quietly wild" period "showed he was human and subject to temptation, like all of us," the associate said.

After high school, Jeffs worked briefly with his father, an accountant, and then became a teacher at the church's new private school, Alta Academy.

He taught math, science and computer programming for about three years before being named principal.

Jeffs presided over Alta Academy, located in the family's compound near the mouth of Little Cottonwood Canyon, until its closure in 1998.

It was in that role that he set about making students live up to this motto: Perfect obedience produces perfect faith, which produces perfect people.

Jeffs didn't hesitate to expel those who were troublesome, several sources said.

"Parents would plead for a second chance and he'd give them a meager second chance, but not hope," the associate said. "He succeeded in pushing dozens of children out of the school that with patience and love could have remained, with no regard to the long-term well-being of those kids."

The curriculum was selective by design, teaching U.S. history only to the time of the establishment of the Constitution, for example, and ignoring events church leaders have deemed fiction — from dinosaurs to Neil Armstrong's walk on the moon.

Jeffs personally oversaw students' religious instruction. The lectures he gave in morning devotionals and in church history and home economics classes were taped, and many families still use those recordings in the education of their children.

In one 1995 tape, Jeffs lectures on the need to be "perfectly obedient and come out of the world" to avoid apostasy and reiterates a well-worn theme about following a single, God-anointed leader — at the time, his father. "That one man is as God over the people and has the right to rule in all areas of life," Jeffs says.

Today, Jeffs is intent on making it clear he is that one man — even as some dispute his claim to authority — and on defining what perfect obedience entails.

JEFFS IS A TALL, LANKY MAN whose church-sermon cadence is described as mesmerizing; even critics compliment his skills as an orator.

He has a dry sense of humor that was most visible at Alta Academy, where he often joined in school plays — once giving a "hilarious" spoof of Sherlock Holmes and another time a dead-on impersonation of Jerry Lewis in "The Disorderly Orderly."

He is estimated to have around 40 wives, some of whom were formerly married to his father, and about 56 children. Most of his time is spent managing church affairs, but he also is described as an accomplished singer/songwriter.

Among Jeffs' credits are "Zion from Above" and "He Will Be Renewed," an ode to his father. He has embellished several well-known LDS hymns with new verses.

And, accompanied by some wives, he has produced tapes and CDs that are available to followers.

Rulon and Warren Jeffs moved to Hildale, Utah, and Colorado City, Ariz. in 1998, when they began to predict that the Apocalypse was near and the Salt Lake Valley had a bull's-eye on it. More pointedly, some say Warren pushed the move as a prelude to taking over the church.

Age and a series of strokes were taking their toll on Rulon Jeffs, and Warren Jeffs began to deliver messages that routinely began with the words: "This is what Father wants me to tell you."

Some directives came over the pulpit. Others were delivered in personal interviews, as many as 50 a day, with families or individuals who made sure not a button or collar was out of place, that sleeves were pulled just so to reveal a bit of the long undergarments worn by the faithful. Some sessions were recorded, including those in which members were challenged about misdeeds.

CRITICS VIEW JEFFS AS A USURPER and believe some of Rulon's last "decisions" were merely his son's machinations, such as the 2000 demand that followers pull their children from public schools and an order that Salt Lake City FLDS members move to Hildale and Colorado City before the 2002 Winter Olympics, which, it was said, would forever corrupt the state.

Another example: Some say Warren orchestrated Rulon's dismissal of

Winston Blackmore as leader of the FLDS' Canadian branch in 2002, removing both a rival and a more senior leader.

With Jeffs' ascendancy, the mantle of authority passed not to the next most worthy senior man, as it has historically, but in the father-to-son ascendancy of a monarchy.

"What we witnessed was a power play," said Ezra Draper, one of Rulon Jeffs' many grandchildren, who moved last June from Colorado City to Bonners Ferry, Idaho, after becoming disillusioned with Jeffs.

"Through careful manipulation he was able to disqualify, on false accusations, one person after another."

So it may not be surprising that Jeffs travels with an entourage of bodyguards.

"He is paranoid about people trying to get to him," said Benjamin Bistline, a former FLDS member and author of the newly published *The Polygamists: A History of Colorado City, Ariz.* "You don't see him around."

Warren Jeffs does not yet have the allegiance and recognition that followers gave to past prophets, including his father, Bistline and others said.

He lacks the down-to-earth warmth of "The Boss," as some called Leroy S. Johnson, Rulon Jeffs' predecessor. And Draper said Rulon was accessible but more reserved.

"Roy would go out of his way to find the person who was having trouble," he said. "Rulon tolerated those who were having challenges. Warren disfellowships them."

Under Warren, Rulon's admonishments have become gospel, which some find unnervingly difficult even as they are cast as the way to salvation.

Rulon Jeffs advised people to limit television viewing and suggested getting

rid of their TVs if that proved impossible. Warren Jeffs demanded they toss out their sets, along with VCRs, video games and Internet connections. Period.

After some FLDS boys' misadventures during a sea cruise, Rulon Jeffs told his flock to avoid cruises with the statement, "Let's stay off the water" — which Warren is said to have translated into a ban on boating, fishing and the like.

Jeffs also banned community recreational activities, such as basketball games, that take members away from home. (Schoolyard basketball standards were removed within a day of that edict, some say.)

"Everything he has done was to take things to an extreme," said Richard Holm, one of dozens of men Jeffs has banished in a series of "adjustments" that are becoming the hallmark of his presidency.

Nineteen-year-old Brigham Holm, Richard's nephew, is among the community's teens who found the increasing restrictions too much to handle.

"It got to the point where me and my friends didn't care anymore," he said. "Living there wasn't fun anymore. I would tell my parents I was going to priesthood meeting and go off and watch movies. I just didn't care. When we couldn't even play basketball and stuff, that was it."

Parents were told to scrap most children's books — including Bible and Book of Mormon storybooks -- and videos, particularly those involving fantasy or that depicted animals with human characteristics.

Draper and his wife, LeighAnn, had built a sizable library to instill a love of reading — and learning — in their children.

"My wife was just in tears," Draper said. "She said 'You can't just lay a Book of Mormon before kids at age 5 and get them to read.'"

"I said, 'Don't worry, I'm your husband, not Warren Jeffs. You do what I want

you to do,' " Draper said.

Still, he said, "We had all those books in our living room and we moved them into a separate room in the house so if guests came in they wouldn't be seen."

Women especially feel pressure to keep their homes tidy, their children in check, behavior controlled — pressure that often is unbearable.

Jeffs has instructed adults to quit patronizing distant restaurants, calling it a waste of time and money. He has scrapped community and holiday celebrations — from marking past leaders' birthdays to Pioneer Day festivities — along with dances, socials and other get-togethers.

And people have been warned that laughter causes the spirit of God to leak from their bodies, amplifying an obscure tenet in Joseph Smith's Doctrine and Covenants.

"We tried not to laugh," Draper said. "We wondered 'How do we do this? Is there anyone who is going to make it?' "

He recalls telling his wife, "Gee, LeighAnn, all we can do is eat."

IN A KINDER LIGHT, Jeffs' actions can be seen as attempts to fulfill the long-standing prediction of his ecclesiastical forefathers: In order to be spared the Apocalypse that will precede the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the church needs a select group of true believers who are pure and perfect in following its teachings.

Of late, Jeffs is said to have suggested that members not bother reading scriptures or listening to tapes and instead rely solely on his instructions, which, he says, are inspired of God.

Most FLDS members are willing to do whatever it takes to be part of that great event regardless of how their actions may be interpreted by outsiders.

Susan Hammon, dean of Mohave Community College, says the news media

and critics are unfairly depicting the community as being in upheaval.

"I know there are concerns about Warren Jeffs," Hammon said. "But so much is made up. This is a totally media-driven drama."

But others say Jeffs' control over the community, as prophet and his father's "mouthpiece," has proven bizarre, hurtful and even scary.

Marvin Wyler came to that conclusion after the ailing Rulon Jeffs sermonized one Sunday in 2001 about former follower Jason Miles Williams.

Williams had sued FLDS leaders for alienation of affection, claiming they persuaded his only wife to leave him. With Warren at his side and occasionally prompting him, the elder Jeffs called on the flock to unite their prayers in asking God to "handle" Williams, even if that required his destruction.

The next morning, Warren led a community prayer that asked for fulfillment of his father's wish, Wyler said.

Several sources say a similar awkward moment occurred one Sunday when Rulon Jeffs brought up the subject of Ruth Stubbs, then involved in a public child-custody fight with her husband, Rodney Holm. "God will bless that girl," Rulon Jeffs is reported to have said — only to be corrected by Warren, who audibly told his father "No, no, no, Father, she is fighting against us."

Rulon Jeffs twice more suggested God would bless Ruth Stubbs. Each time he was corrected by Warren.

IT IS THIS HARSHER LEADERSHIP that alarms some FLDS members as well as outsiders, even as Jeffs' more ardent followers embrace his judgments.

A trickle of expulsions turned into a stream in January when Jeffs ousted some of the community's most prominent and long-standing members, calling into question their standing here and in the afterlife.

Ever the school principal, Jeffs has told men he has cast out to provide a list of their spiritual failings to see if they match up with transgressions revealed to him by the Lord.

Wives and children have been separated from husbands and fathers; parents and children, brothers and sisters have ended up on different sides of this theological divide. Many are accepting these familial rearrangements in perfect obedience, believing their salvation depends on it.

"There has been so much conflict and needless turmoil and sorrow that has been put on families in the name of religion," said a woman associated with the Canadian branch of the FLDS church. "Kids who used to play with their next-door neighbors aren't allowed to do that and are saying nasty things to each other when they meet across the fence, like, 'Your father is going to hell.' "

The pain, some say, is immeasurable.

"There is nothing closer to murder," Richard Holm said, "short of taking a gun and shooting somebody."

Tribune reporters Pamela Manson and Hilary Groutage Smith contributed to this story.

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