

# SIN & DEATH IN MORMON COUNTRY

## A Latter-day Tragedy

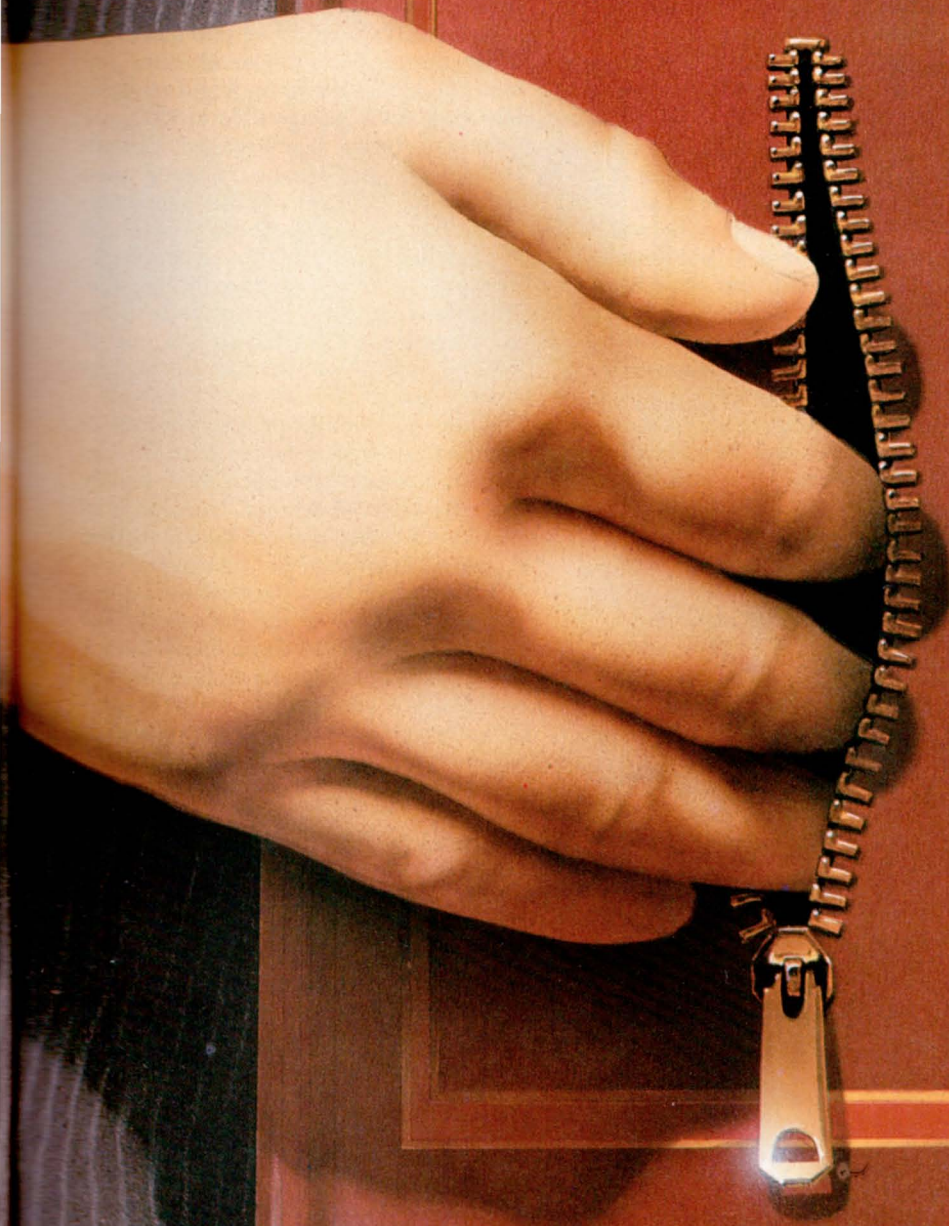
• *Teenager's suicide sparks a \$26-million lawsuit against the Mormon Church and its controversial sex-counseling.*

Report by Mark A. Taylor

ILLUSTRATION BY W.C. STUDIOS



Book of Mormon



**O**n March 2, 1982, Kip Eliason, age 16, distraught and filled with self-hate over his inability to stop masturbating, committed suicide. Before asphyxiating himself, Kip left his father a note:

Dear Dad,  
I love you more than what words can say. If it were possible, I would stay alive for only you, for I really only love you, but it is not possible. I must first love myself, and I do not. The strange feeling of darkness and self-hate overpowers all my defenses. I must unfortunately yield to it. This turbulent feeling is only for a few to truly understand. I feel that you do not comprehend the immense feeling of self-hatred I have. This is the only way I feel that I can relieve myself of these feelings now. Carry on with your life and be happy. I love you more than words can say.

—Your son, Kip

Kip Eliason's five-year struggle to overcome masturbation started at age 11 when his grandmother persuaded him to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), whose members are better known as Mormons. Kip was an intelligent and sensitive young man, perhaps too sensitive. The death of his moth-

er when the boy was six had profoundly affected him. At times he was quiet and reflective, spending hours alone in his room, and yet he was outgoing by nature. He was a born leader. His classmates and teachers admired him for his friendly way and all-American good looks. Kip was truthful and possessed a farm-community naiveté.

He loved the Mormon Church—which has 5.5 million members worldwide—and was devoted to its teachings. His father, Eugene Eliason, a non-Mormon, believes that in some ways the church may have played a substitute-mother role for the boy. (For clarity, Eugene Eliason will be referred to as Eliason throughout this report; his son will always be called Kip.)

Kip was not the kind of youngster you'd think would commit suicide, but when his church told him that he'd find guilt, depression and self-hate if he masturbated, he believed so. When it said he'd go to hell if he didn't stop, he believed that too. And when he was told that masturbation was a "building block of suicide," he took the church at its word.

Kip's death rocked the predominantly Mormon agribusiness community of Boise, Idaho, where he was a high-school senior at Capital High School. Of course, there were the stories that occasionally filtered through the congregation about

young people who, like Kip, committed suicide because they couldn't live up to the church's stringent antisex doctrines. But they were just stories and, if they were true, they didn't happen in Boise; they happened some 300 miles southeast, in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Salt Lake City is the headquarters of the Mormon Church and the power base from which it wields enormous financial and political influence. (Mormons comprise 70% of Utah's population.) There Kip's death was indeed viewed by church leaders as an unfortunate tragedy, but it wasn't the isolated incident the church would like its brethren in Boise to believe.

Today Kip's story is one told more and more often in Mormon wardhouses. Behind the scenes the church and community mental-health agencies in Utah are quietly fighting a sex-related mental-health epidemic among Mormon men and women. Mental-health fallout in Utah communities has been substantial and pervasive. Utah has the highest birthrate and the largest families in America. More than 50% of all births are by teenage mothers, with seven of ten out of wedlock, and it has one of the highest divorce rates in the nation.

While the number of teen suicides in America has tripled in the past decade, Utah has consistently been 3.5% higher than the national average. According to that state's Department of Vital Statistics, it ranks 13th nationally in child abuse, but comparing Utah statistics with those compiled by the National Association for the Protection of Children, the incidence of reported child abuse is six times higher in Utah. The incidence of sexual abuse—including rape, incest and intercourse—is 33% more than the national average, and the child-murder rate is five times higher.

Besides having a powerhouse football team, the Mormons' very own Brigham Young University—alma mater of Donny and Marie Osmond and 1984 Miss America Sharlene Wells—has one of the highest coed-pregnancy rates in America.

Kip and countless others have fallen victim to guilt, self-hate, mental illness and suicide created by their inability to control healthy sexual desires as mandated by the Mormon Church. Making things worse is its amateurish attempts to provide counseling that utilizes powerful behavioral-modification techniques with inadequate training.

Mormon antisex indoctrinations start early. Children are taught that sex is dirty and disgusting, that it is the tool of Satan. The church uses guilt and the threat of eternal damnation to drive its message home. When a child reaches adolescence, the conflict between what he or she has

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learned and sexual feelings experienced can create devastating consequences.

After Kip's death, Eliason moved to Salt Lake City. He was angry and hurt. There he met parents who had stories like his—youngsters ending up in mental institutions or worse, committing suicide. Eliason worked through his grief and anger by talking to anyone willing to listen and by going to the library and researching teen suicide and the Mormons. In October 1983 he filed a \$26-million wrongful-death suit against the Mormon Church, alleging that the Latter-day Saints went a step further than just providing his son with spiritual, moral and personal guidance when they subjected him to sex- and masturbation-counseling. The suit accuses the church of negligence for providing counseling that fell outside the realm of religious teaching and for not requiring or providing training for its counselors.

The suit charges that this counseling combined with the church's harsh anti-masturbation indoctrinations were the direct cause of Kip's depression, self-hate, suicide attempts and eventual death.

Moreover, it alleges that the church knew or should have known that its attempts to indoctrinate and provide sexual counseling for Kip were having a severe and adverse reaction on him; yet they continued. The suit charges that this failure to exercise a proper standard of care was negligent.

The suit also contends that the Mormon Church subjected Kip to what amounted to an intentional attempt at mind control by using brainwashing techniques under the guise of spiritual teaching.

A pretrial affidavit was filed by noted sex-behavior expert Dr. Jack Annon, clinical and forensic psychologist, author of three books on sexual dysfunctions and disorders, and a member of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists and of other professional societies. Annon stated: "Based upon my review of even a limited amount of literature and on documentation specifically pertaining to Kip Eliason, it appears clear that the LDS Church promoted and engaged in behavior-modification counseling in the specific areas of masturbation."

In letters to his father and in his remarkably well-written journal, Kip chronicled his fight to overcome masturbation. He wrote: "I know immorality is a very serious sin. I really want to repent and be free of this terrible and degrading burden of masturbation. I am willing to do anything I have to do, even excommunication, to be able to repent and be free of this sin. I would rather go to hell and suffer there than be unworthy."

Eliason recalls that before Kip became involved with the church, he was happy as a lark: "He got along with everyone just beautifully. We water-skiied, boated, fished, snow-skied and did everything together. We laughed and had a ball."

Mormons are taught that only by achieving perfection on Earth will they reach "godhood" and find eternal life in heaven. To reach "perfection" one must first be found "worthy." Bestowing "worthiness" is a shared responsibility between God and the church's elders.

For most Latter-day Saints, including Kip, the constant battle to become "worthy" is a hopeless struggle. Becoming "worthy" and ultimately reaching "perfection" means living up to the church's 4,300 commandments—including those condemning natural sex acts.

To his classmates at Capital High School and fellow Mormons, Kip seemed jovial, outgoing and, well, almost perfect. In many ways he was a model child—highly motivated, voted most inspirational member of the track team, a straight-A student, a seemingly well-adjusted individual immersed in his church beliefs and in striving for perfection. Mormon elders often used him as an example of what a fine young man should be, someone others could aspire to be like. Kip often talked about going to college and earning a degree in a humanitarian field.

Kip's aunt Janice Ballatore, an active Mormon with whom he lived for two summers, remembers him telling her of his masturbation problem one day while running errands: "I told him not to worry, that all young boys probably do it. He seemed very relieved. Kip was a smart, good-looking kid who took the church perfection business seriously. He really thought he could be perfect. He said, 'The church told me I could if I really wanted to try.'"

**MORMON SEX "EDUCATION"**

In a devotional speech to young adults in 1974 the late Spencer W. Kimball, Prophet, Seer and Revelator of the Mormon Church, admonished teenagers: "Immorality [petting, premarital sex, adultery, homosexuality and masturbation] brings generally a guilt deep and lasting. These guilt complexes are the stuff of which

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### *Kip desperately wanted to prove himself worthy. He even tried lying, but he couldn't lie to himself.*

mental breakdowns come; they are the building blocks of suicide, the fabric of distorted personalities and the wounds that scar and decapitate individuals or families."

In *Love vs. Lust*, a pamphlet written for teenagers, Kimball told young men that premarital sex is a serious sin, one just short of murder. He wrote: "The young man is untrue to his manhood who promises popularity, good times, security, fun and even love, when all he can give is passion and its diabolical fruits—guilt complexes, disgust, hatred, abhorrence, eventual loathing, and possible pregnancy without legitimacy and honor."

Insisting on anonymity, a young, attractive woman sums up 20 years of Mormon sex indoctrinations: "They tell you it's filthy and ugly. They say you'll be shamed and damned. By the time you're 20, you've got more sexual hang-ups than you can deal with. It's crazy."

Even married people are told that sex for pleasure is out, that the only legitimate purpose of sex is to be the tool of "procreating new spirits." In a confidential letter responding to an inquiry from a

married couple asking if oral sex was permitted, the late Mormon Prophet Harold B. Lee stated: "I was shocked to have you raise the question about 'oral lovemaking in the genital area among married couples.' Heaven forbid any such degrading activities which would be abhorrent in the sight of the Lord. For any Latter-day Saint . . . to engage in any kind of perversions of this sacred God-given gift of procreation would be sure to bring down the condemnation of the Lord whom we would offend were we to engage in any such practice."

Once known for their practice of polygamy (multiple marriages), today's Latter-day Saints are ultraconservative, tight-knit, industrious and secretive. The church demands absolute faith in and conformity to all its teachings and doctrines, and it attempts to govern all aspects of its congregation's lives, including their sex lives.

In a letter to his father, Kip wrote: "I think since you're my father who I love very much, I can tell you something about me that I have a problem with. It started when I was around nine or ten years of age. I had my first wet dream and

was experiencing new feelings. I really don't know how I got started, but it doesn't matter. I did it for about a year, then out of fright that I would go to Satan if I did things like that, I stopped doing it. Then about a year and a half later I was starting with it again. It was the first week of junior high in the 7th grade. I really don't know what it was that got me doing it again. For about a year I rationalized that it was right; it really wasn't a big problem then. But I did feel guilty. Then through my guilt and what I was learning [from the church] I knew it was wrong for me."

Eliason remembers: "Initially, Kip came to me and said he'd begun to have nocturnal emissions. He asked if I thought it would affect his church priesthood. I told him, 'No way! It's normal, and every man goes through it.'"

Kip desperately wanted to be a good man and prove himself worthy. At first he even tried lying, but he couldn't lie to himself. He wrote: "I had lied about it to everyone, even the bishop and myself. I would go in for [bishop] interviews, and when the 'golden question' was asked, 'Are you morally clean?' I looked in his eyes and lied. My life was downhill all the time. I felt horrible inside, and it showed. I didn't have many friends. I felt too humiliated to see the bishop. I tried a million times to stop on my own. But it was an obsession. A hideous habit that I thought to be totally impossible to quit. I knew Satan had me twisted on his little finger. I thought I would never be able to lose the chains that held me fast."

When Kip finally told his bishop the truth, the bishop scheduled regular counseling sessions to assist the youth to stop masturbating and to monitor his progress. The church would supply the information he needed to overcome his sin, but he alone would have to stop—that is, if he really wanted to.

Unlike churches that require clergymen to have training and even college degrees before providing counseling, Mormon bishops and elders have little or no training in psychology or sexology. The only instruction they receive comes from either *The Bishop's General Handbook* or the litany of pamphlets and instructional manuals pumped out by the LDS publishing arm.

One pamphlet written for teenage boys is titled *Steps to Overcoming Masturbation*. It recommends avoiding being alone whenever possible, but "if you have a friend who masturbates, end the friendship immediately—don't fool yourself by thinking you can stop together; it will only lead to even greater perversions."

As a reminder of their particular sin, Mormon masturbators are instructed to carry a pocket calendar with them wher-

*The church's treatment for homosexuals might be right out of the future-shock cult-film A Clockwork Orange.*

ever they go. They are told to paint the days they masturbated black. Masturbators are also told not to read about or talk to anyone about their problem.

In the bathroom, Mormons are advised to always leave the door slightly ajar to avoid being alone, and to never admire themselves in the mirror. "Never stay in the bathroom for longer than five minutes, even to bathe—then GET OUT FAST." The author recommends never touching the "intimate parts" of the body except during normal toileting.

In the bedroom they are instructed to dress for security. The more layers of clothing, the better. If the urge to masturbate becomes unbearable, yell "STOP!" as a way of changing the subject. Another option is to grasp a Book of Mormon and hold it tightly. In severe cases the masturbator is told to tie his hand to the bedframe so that semisleep masturbation doesn't occur.

In the pamphlet *Love vs. Lust*, Kimball warned masturbators that if they don't stop, they will end up homosexual: "Masturbation is the introduction of the more serious sin of exhibitionism and the gross

sin of homosexuality." And in *Tools for Missionaries* the church states that medical doctors believe masturbation "dulls the mind and has adverse effect on the memory."

Dr. Vern Bullough of State University College at Buffalo, New York, is the author of many books on homosexuality and masturbation, including *Sexual Variance in Society and History*. Bullough, who also heads the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, takes issue with Mormon claims of medical backing: "Obviously, members of the society would take exception to the attempts of the LDS Church to claim scientific backing for their stand on masturbation; their science is about 80 years out of date, and it was questionable even 80 years ago."

If the church's stand on masturbation is based on turn-of-the-century science, its controversial treatment for homosexuals might be right out of the future-shock novel and cult-film classic *A Clockwork Orange*.

The so-called electroshock conditioning starts in the downtown Salt Lake City office of psychologist and active Mor-

mon Robert Card. First, electrodes are strapped to the homosexual's arms or fingers, biofeedback monitors are attached to his head, and a circular electronic sensor is placed around his penis. Next, the patient sits in a darkened room where he views videotapes of heterosexual and homosexual sex acts.

If the patient gets an erection while watching the heterosexual tapes, a biofeedback digital-display monitor registers a positive numerical reading. But if the patient begins to have an erection while viewing the homosexual tapes, the electrodes strapped to his arms or fingers deliver an electrical shock.

Don Attridge, an ex-Mormon homosexual who was also a member of the famed Mormon Tabernacle Choir, underwent five months of shock treatments conducted by Dr. Card, whom he refers to as Dr. Frankenstein. "Every time I left his office, I was hornier than ever. Many times my arms were red and cut up from the shocks—they looked like hamburger."

Another ex-Mormon gay, Les (who wanted only his first name identified), is very angry. "It's horrible having the hell shocked out of you when you get sexually excited. The entire thing was disgusting." Les even considered suicide. "After a while suicide looked like the most honorable thing to do. Many Mormon gays do it. I had it all planned, an automobile accident on a certain curve in the mountains; it was a way my children and family would be spared."

In February 1984 the Australian television version of *60 Minutes* aired a segment about the treatments, titled "Saints and Sinners." Utah native and ex-Mormon Gary L. Stone told producer Warren McStoker that he didn't just leave the church after being treated by Dr. Card. He kidnapped his four-year-old daughter from his ex-wife to get her away from the church and then moved to Australia.

"Getting myself and my daughter away from the Mormon Church was the best decision I've made in my entire 32-year life." About Dr. Card's treatment he says, "It's destructive. They are purposely trying to destroy you. If you are a homosexual in the church, you have only three options—you can lie, you can die or you can disappear."

While publicly abhorring any form of pornography, the church uses porn to treat homosexuality. And although it doesn't openly embrace Dr. Card's treatment, many higher-ups endorse the therapy and even refer church members for treatment.

The Mormon instructional pamphlet *Homosexuality* outlines and suggests specific therapeutic methods to be used in sex counseling. They include establishing

rapport and confidentiality, assessment-counseling, fantasy-changing, goal-setting, thought-stopping, chain-breaking and aversion therapy. The church believes that all homosexuals started out as masturbators; so counselors are instructed to identify the masturbator, gain his confidence, assess his needs and then design and implement a plan to help him stop before it leads to "more perverse and repugnant sins."

Although the church encourages the use of these potentially dangerous therapies, it fails to offer implementation guidelines. Bishops have no way of recognizing emotional and psychological problems or even mental illness. Also, they have no way of knowing whether the therapy is helpful or harmful.

Again, Dr. Jack Annon: "It is my professional opinion that the LDS Church has gone a step beyond propounding a certain viewpoint that masturbation is a sin, and has actually instructed its leaders, teachers and bishops to provide counseling and to utilize behavior-modification skills that can have very dangerous and adverse effects."

After Kip admitted his "sin," he felt relieved. "It has been exactly 11 weeks ago that I was called in by my new bishop to have an interview with him for the On My Honor Award. I knew that the question would be asked, 'Are you worthy?' I prayed for strength to tell the truth before I went for the interview. I felt a little nervous at first, but then I was relaxed. The question was asked, and I told him the truth. I felt as clean as I felt at my baptism. I feel 'new' again! I have not masturbated for 11 weeks now. This is after I tried and tried to stop. After I saw the bishop, I knew I would never be immoral ever again. The chains are loose, and I am free. . . . New doors to truth and happiness have opened up to me."

Unfortunately, Kip's hopes were dashed when he eventually masturbated again. He wrote: "It seems I have tried to stop a billion times, but it's the same old feelings. It affects every part of my life. If I could only get rid of this one sin, I know I could be a better person. I know I will run into a lot more problems in my life, but I think having a good self-image will help a lot through those times. Being rid of this ugly immoral sin will save my life and make it worth living."

By the time Kip was 15, he and his dad discussed the problem regularly. Eliason continued to try to convince Kip that masturbation was a normal and even healthy part of growing up and discovering one's own sexuality. He supplied Kip with books by medical experts refuting the information supplied by the Mormon Church. Even though Kip loved him, Eliason's influence couldn't match the

well-oiled antimasturbation campaign of the Mormons.

In a letter to his father, Kip regurgitated his indoctrination. "Now I know you are going to say it's good, it's natural, and 99.9% of the human population does it. Dad, I have read the statistics; I have read the sex books; I know the authors are professionals with all the 'facts.' But for me, it is wrong! For others it may be right, but not for me."

At school, friends noticed a difference in his behavior. He clammed up and seemed lost in thought. The church was demanding an ever greater commitment from him. If he wasn't in school or doing homework, then he was at the Mormon wardhouse.

Nearly five years had passed since Kip's first wet dream and feelings of sexual awakening. For most, adolescence is a time of personal exploration, discovery and excitement, but for Kip it was a time of torment and self-disgust.

Eliason noticed a change in Kip's personality. "He seemed down in the dumps for no apparent reason. He began spending a lot of time in his room. I found out later he was praying and reading the Scriptures for hours on end." After Kip's death he found an extensive library on sex, human reproduction and scores of pamphlets and books that the church had supplied the boy.

In a letter to an unnamed church elder, Kip pleaded for help: "How can I have the confidence that I won't let myself fall into this temptation ever again? I really want to fulfill my priesthood calling, and I can't if I am not morally clean. I don't even deserve it! I am willing to do anything I have to do to be able to repent and be free of this sin."

By the fall of 1981 the once-active, outgoing and well-liked teenager was withdrawn and profoundly depressed. On December 10, 1981, Kip tried to kill himself by drinking a bottle of iodine mixed with alcohol. He had come to hate himself so completely, he believed that death and damnation were all he deserved.

If there had been any doubt concerning the severity of his emotional conflict or state of mind, Kip's attempted suicide should have silenced it. The Eliason suit alleges that the Mormon Church was aware of the suicide attempt, but continued to counsel him in complete disregard for his deteriorating mental state.

Dr. Annon believes, "It is my firm professional opinion, based upon information that I have at hand, that the LDS Church attempted to teach very stringent and difficult standards to a boy who was vulnerable to emotional conflicts, and that the counseling was inadequate and appears to have contributed to the boy's suicidal ideations."

On January 10, 1982, just a month after his first suicide attempt, Kip was ordained into the Aaronic Priesthood. One in a series of Mormon priesthoods, the Aaronic demands greater responsibility, commitment and perfection.

On Valentine's Day, February 14, Kip made another attempt to end his life by again drinking a mixture of iodine and alcohol. He was taken to the psychiatric unit of the St. Alphonsus Regional Medical Center, where he was diagnosed as suicidal. (The medical facility is a codefendant in the Eliason suit.) Eight days later Kip was released to his father.

Eliason recalls picking his son up at the hospital. "He seemed happy to be going home. Before we left, he introduced me to a 16-year-old girl he had met there. She had told him she was there for the same reason he was. Kip seemed very taken by his new friend and, when they said goodbye, he took her into his arms and kissed her. I'll never forget it."

On March 2, 1982, Kip was home alone while his father made an overnight business trip. About 9 p.m. Eliason called him from his hotel. "Kip seemed all right. I asked him if he'd taken his medicine, and he said he had. I told him I'd be home soon, and that was about it."

Sometime after the call, Kip wrote a suicide note. He went to the closed garage, started the family car and went to sleep.

Dead at 16, Kip Eliason had but two "vices," masturbation and telling the truth. He was unable to stop masturbating and too honorable to lie—something tens of thousands of other Mormons must be doing right now.

Every time Eugene Eliason returns to Boise, he visits Kip's grave. Sometimes he drives through their old neighborhood. He feels closest to Kip there. If a Mormon neighbor recognizes him, they pretend not to notice. Now labeled an anti-Mormon, he worries about all those young people who, like Kip, are giving their all to the Mormon Church.

Today Eliason shows his anger less frequently than he did two years ago, even though his precedent-setting clergy-malpractice suit has cost him everything. (After several lengthy delays and setbacks it is slated to go to court this spring.) It's not that his anger has subsided the way it might have had his son been killed in an auto accident, say. That kind of natural dissipation of anger doesn't apply to him. Until he can find justice and reconcile the fact that Kip died not only believing himself a failure at age 16, but also believing that he deserved to die as punishment for his "despicable sin," Eliason's anger and grieving will continue.

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*Journalist Mark A. Taylor, a native of Salt Lake City, has written feature articles for a number of Far West publications.*