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'8: The Mormon Proposition': Audacious look at church's role in gay-marriage ban

By Jen Chaney
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It takes a certain amount of nerve for a former Mormon to make a film that takes on the Mormon Church for alleged political meddling in one of the biggest gay-rights battles in recent history.

It takes even more nerve to then unveil that movie in Utah, the home of Mormon Church headquarters and the epicenter of the Latter-day Saints faith.

Clearly Steven Greenstreet -- a Silver Spring resident, onetime adherent to the Mormon faith and co-director of "8: The Mormon Proposition," one of the buzzy documentaries to debut at this year's Sundance Film Festival -- isn't lacking in the audacity department. His film -- which the church has blasted as "obviously biased," even before its release -- examines the church's role in the contentious campaigns over Proposition 8, [the same-sex marriage ban](#) Californians voted into law in 2008.

"One way or another, we're going to put this movie in front of as many voters as possible across the nation," Greenstreet says by phone from Park City, where the annual celebration of indie cinema and studio dealmaking has been underway for the past week. "The people in California went to the ballot box with misinformation and lies orchestrated by billions of dollars raised by a church."

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Using internal church documents and recordings of Mormon officials, and interviews with gay activists, political figures and former members of the church, Greenstreet and his fellow director, Miami journalist Reed Cowan, make the case that the church overstepped its bounds as a nonprofit, religious organization to ensure that Prop 8 passed. But the movie doesn't just focus on that single piece of legislation.

"8" also explores the broader impact of what the filmmakers describe as the church's historically intolerant attitude toward gays, using tales of suicide attempts by young Mormons struggling with their sexual orientations and men still grappling with memories of the shock treatments they endured in order to "cure" them of their homosexuality.

"We have a lot of numbers and money and politics in our film, but really, it's about the people and their stories," Greenstreet, 30, says.

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The church has not addressed specific allegations in the film. Mormon officials do not appear on-camera, although we do hear a phone call between church spokeswoman Kim Farah and Cowan, who also was raised Mormon. "I think that we don't want to put ourselves front and center in a battle with the gay community," she tells him.

When The Washington Post requested comment, the church forwarded its official statement, also from Farah: "We have not seen '8: The Mormon Proposition.' However, judging from the trailer and background material online, it appears that accuracy and truth are rare commodities in this film. Although we have given many interviews on this topic, we had no desire to participate in something so obviously biased."

The anti-gay group America Forever has taken a more pugnacious stance against the documentary, issuing 80,000 faxes to its base that condemn the movie as a "hateful attack" on the church and declare: "Shame on Sundance" and "Shame on Reed Cowan."

Early reviews of "8" have been mixed. Daniel Fienberg, a blogger for the Web site Hitfix, dismissed it as "sloppily assembled propaganda," while the Salt Lake City Tribune called it "a vital, important cry for an open dialogue." Variety said the film "covers a lot of ground in a short space, not always in the most organized way, but on enough fronts to spark an informed dialogue."

All the attention has sparked interest from distributors, Greenstreet and Cowan say, although they haven't inked any agreements yet. Adding currency to the film is [a closely watched federal court case in California](#) regarding the constitutionality of Prop 8, as well as President Obama's [recently announced desire](#) to end the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Both filmmakers say their work on the movie has jeopardized relationships with their families, whose members continue to practice the Mormon faith. "I know they are hurt, and on so many levels, by the fact that I attach my name as a director to this film," says Greenstreet, whose parents still live in his home town of Pylesville, Md.

Cowan, 37, who grew up in the town of Roosevelt, Utah, and is openly gay, says he hasn't spoken to his sisters or father in six months. (He occasionally speaks to his mother.) "I'm sad to say my parents haven't gotten to any screenings yet," he says. "And they could."

Still, Greenstreet, who describes himself as a straight man and gay activist, doesn't regret his decision to make this film or to quit the faith that once defined his life.

"Leaving the church was a grueling and painful experience," he says. "It was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. But I am who I am today because of that decision."

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