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## Believer

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# Believer

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Believer* (2018), directed by Don Argott.

## **Keywords**

LGBTQ, Mormons, LDS Church, Suicide, Imagine Dragons, LoveLoud, homosexuality, gay, lesbian

## **Author Notes**

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



**Believer (2018), dir. Don Argott**

Dan Reynolds, frontman of the band *Imagine Dragons*, is a Mormon. He is straight, married, and has three children. He is also one of countless Mormons who has gay friends, including some who are Mormons, and who is unhappy with the continued rigid approach of the LDS Church to LGBTQ people. What makes him unique is that he decided to use his popularity as a way to send a message that change is needed.

Reynolds grew up in a traditional Mormon family, and went on a mission as many young Mormons do. As part of this, he told gays and lesbians that homosexuality was a sin. He began to question his views when he found he had gay friends, and when he married Aja Volkman, who was not raised Mormon but embraced the LDS church—except for its views on homosexuality. Later, his Mormon friend Tyler Glenn (whom he had known since they shared a mission in Omaha) came out as gay in 2014. Like Reynolds, Glenn was already a successful musician (as frontman of *Neon Trees*). Glenn left the LDS after the church announced in 2015 that the children of same-

sex couples could not be baptized in the church, which represents total exclusion from community and salvation.

The number of suicides in Utah, especially among young people, has skyrocketed in the last decade. This can be correlated with the increasingly vocal stance of the church against gay marriage as this became a national issue, beginning with Proposition 8 in 2008, which sought to ensure the illegality of same sex marriage in California. Reynolds heard too many stories of young gay people ending their lives due to feelings of depression and exclusion. Although the LDS church tells its members that gay feelings are not sinful, it also tells them it is sinful to act on them in any way—and that this will result in excommunication from the church and one's family, which will last for all eternity according to Mormon beliefs.

Reynolds decided to create an event that would make public the need for acceptance and love of LGBTQ people in the Mormon Church. He planned *LoveLoud* as an outdoor musical festival in Utah that would make this message of welcome clear. He visited with LGBTQ Mormons and heard their stories, as well as the stories from parents of gay teens like Stockton Powers who took his own life. It was difficult to find funding and a location in Utah, but Reynolds persisted. As a married straight Mormon, he knows it would be easy to stay silent and wait for the church to change—but he also knows that this is wrong, as the church will only change if its members show their support for LGBTQ people. The church leaders say that they cannot change the scriptures, but they have in the past managed both to abolish polygamy (in 1904) and to allow blacks into the church (in 1978). Obviously, the word of God can and should be interpreted, as it always has been. And just a week before *LoveLoud*, the LDS church issued a statement of support for the event, resulting in increased ticket sales.

Scenes from the festival itself—a “Mormon Woodstock”—are moving and affirming. Twelve year old Savannah, who was prevented from giving her testimony that she was gay in her LDS church, tearfully gave her testimony in front of 20,000 affirming people, alongside her mother. As a result, her father has also accepted her identity. Straight and gay Mormons of all ages expressed joy and hope at the affirmation they felt and received. Tyler Glenn and *Neon Trees* gave an emotional and powerful performance, as well as Reynolds and *Imagine Dragons*.

A few months after the event, the LDS church reaffirmed its traditional views about homosexuality and gay marriage. Although they supported the event’s message of love for LGBTQ Mormons, there has been no acceptance of the idea that they should be allowed to have sexual relationships or marriage. Reynolds has vowed to hold the event every year until it is no longer necessary. And as a veteran of a Mormon mission who knocked on thousands of doors and persisted even when they were slammed in his face, he says he will continue to knock on this door until it is answered. As he put it in the film: “A determined Mormon is a scary thing; I can tell you that, because they don’t stop.”