

DEALING WITH TRADITIONS AND POLICIES

By D. Jeff Burton

makes change difficult, and we can't expect our general leaders to go willy-nilly altering policies with every mood change. But at the local level, we can talk about them and influence how they are applied today.



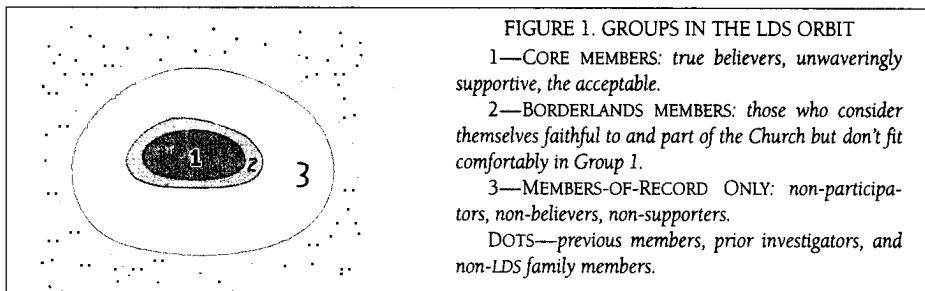
Volunteering for Church positions. Most members feel hesitant about volunteering or expressing interest in particular callings. Whether the idea that we shouldn't volunteer is tradition or policy, I'm not sure, but when a calling is made, it rarely includes asking for volunteers. Callings are usually first announced to an unaware congregation in sacrament meeting. Sometimes noting the surprised faces associated with these announcements is the most interesting thing that happens during the meeting block.

Seriously, we all know of members who have suffered, struggled, and even failed at callings that just weren't right for them. When this happens, the member or the leader will often suggest it has been some sort of "growth experience," or "refiner's fire."

I recognize that this is a complicated issue. Certainly, in some circumstances, callings are best left strictly to the bishopric and their efforts to seek inspiration. Sometimes issues related to callings and releases mandate confidentiality, and we all likely know of cases where members grew and blossomed in a calling they probably would never have sought out on their own.

SUGGESTION NO. 3. *Explore your callings with your local leaders. If you like teaching, for example, I think you can safely go to your bishop—without sneaking around so nobody will notice, or having to find creative ways to drop hints or enlist the help of others in letting the bishop know—and say, "I really love teaching, and I'd like to teach a class. Could you ask the Lord if it might be possible sometime?" Conversely, if you don't like teaching, or can't do it, or if even the thought of it gives you hives, that also ought to be legitimate information to pass along, "All things considered, I'd rather not be called as a teacher."*

A little thought experiment, just for fun: Suppose we had a policy or tradition that allows or encourages the bishop to announce (if he chooses), "The scoutmaster position will be opening up next month; anyone interested in exploring that opportunity to serve can contact me." Or, "We're looking for a good couple to serve as LDS Social Service representatives; if you think you might be interested, let's talk.")



IN GENERAL; THIS column explores what it is like to be in the borderlands of the church with the various programs, policies, and traditions unique to our religion.¹ I hope the column also helps borderlanders cope with the stresses of church life on the edges of the core group and encourages them to stay connected and even to move towards the core.

Those of us in the borderlands accept and enjoy the best parts of the core church—Christ's gospel and teachings, our LDS history and culture, the good people at all levels of leadership, and our associations with our neighbors and ward members. We also generally accept and support the interesting policies and traditions we encounter. But frankly, it is sometimes Church traditions and policies that cause us to migrate to the borderlands.

Sometimes it is hard to know which is which. Is the practice we encounter a policy or a tradition? Traditions often graduate into policies, and sometimes policies become our traditions. For example, stake baptisms in Utah traditionally are held on Saturday. Is this a written policy? Is it a former policy that become a tradition? Or vice versa?

In the area I live, it is the tradition—or is it a policy?—for members to go home immediately following the meeting block. When I lived in Michigan, our ward in Ann Arbor had a wonderful tradition of staying after for an hour or two, talking with friends and munching a few veggies. It was fun and brought us together. But did it go against

some policy here in Utah? (A former bishop in Bountiful told me we couldn't do that here.)

It used to be the tradition that non-priesthood holders, sometimes even women, could stand in the circle as babies were blessed. Now a policy no longer allows it.

I could easily continue naming similar examples of church-related policies and traditions. And it is fun wondering about them, how to deal with them, what might happen if they were changed in various ways, and how they could be changed. Unfortunately, I believe some current policies and traditions keep us from being better members, push us away from the center, and also probably scare away some very fine folks who otherwise might be more involved. It is with this in mind that I have chosen to use this column to explore a few troublesome policies and traditions and to suggest how we, as borderlanders, might deal with them.

I begin with two general suggestions, followed by others related to specific policies and traditions:

SUGGESTION NO. 1. *It helps to recognize that current traditions and policies aren't black and white, right or wrong, nor fixed in concrete. They can often be modified to meet the needs of individuals at the local level. And they can and do change over time.*

SUGGESTION NO. 2. *We should also recognize that long-standing policies and traditions are not usually the creation of today's leaders. Policies and traditions often involve complicated issues. They have a "life of their own" which*

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Excluding non-recommend holders from temple marriage ceremonies. I married a BYU graduate whose parents were non-LDS, and neither of my Mormon parents held a temple recommend, even though they are among the finest people one could ever meet. My bishop, who I suspect had refreshingly little faith in traditions that hurt people, gave my parents a one-day recommend and used special pull downtown to arrange for us to be married twice on the same day—once outside the temple for all those who loved us, and once in front of those who carried a temple recommend. Frankly, our civil ceremony remains my strongest memory because all of those who cared about us were there sharing in our happiest moment.

Now, not everyone has a special bishop who can or will circumvent tradition and policy in the way my bishop did thirty-five years ago. Most members in circumstances similar to ours have to endure seeing their non-LDS or less-active parents miss the most important event in their lives and be allowed to participate only in those noisy receptions that, frankly, could be dispensed with.

Yes, we know the arguments for current marriage policies and traditions—everything from worry about family members who might not respect the sacredness we attribute to temple clothing and sealing covenants, to hope that the current policy may motivate parents or other family members to become more active, pay tithing, and so forth. But it seems to go against other Church traditions and policies such as family togetherness and being welcoming to non-Mormons and wavering Mormons.

SUGGESTIONS NO. 4. *It never hurts to explore your unique situation with your bishop and/or stake president to see what accommodations can be made to make your marriage ceremony the best experience possible for all concerned. Again, general policies can often be tailored to the needs of the local situation. When discussing the problem with your local leaders, invite them to join you in trying to imagine how Christ might decide*

the issue. Have them think about a table in a high council meeting room, with Jesus sitting at the head and his early and recent apostles sitting along the sides. The issue of who can attend your temple marriage comes up for discussion in the meeting. Invite your leaders to imagine the discussion and the eventual outcome.

Another thought experiment: Suppose there were a separate corridor to the sealing rooms that non-member, non-temple recommend-holder parents could use to attend the most important event in their children’s lives. If there are worries about non-members not understanding the sacred nature of the temple and what they’ll encounter, perhaps a short tutorial about the meaning of temple clothing and the sealing ceremony could be given.



Temple recommend questions. Because of the wording of current interview questions, some borderlanders don’t believe they qualify for a temple recommend.

I think most of you know how the interview typically goes for most of us in the borderlands:

BISHOP: “Is there anything in your conduct relating to members of your family that is not in harmony with the teachings of the Church?”

BORDERLANDER: *(Pausing, shifting in the seat, wondering what the bishop wants to hear, what he will accept, how much we want to say about things, what “anything” means, how to be completely honest, and so forth.)* “Well, I try to be kind. . . . I think

I’m a good parent, but you know my feelings about giving the kids too much structure. . . . Yeah, I guess it’s okay...”

BISHOP: “I know you’re doing fine.”

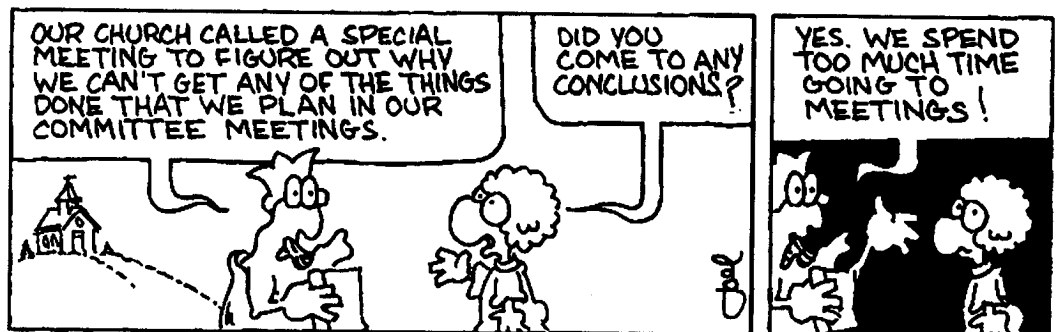
One question that many borderlanders may feel uncomfortable about is the one that asks if we have a “testimony” of the restoration of the gospel. If they are like me, borderlanders are faithful members who are uncomfortable claiming absolute knowledge but have a lot of curiosity and see the paradoxes inherent in all religion. So they will again try to explain that they live by faith, that curiosity and skepticism are a legitimate part of the search for truth, that they accept that the gospel certainly *could* be true, and so forth. Whew!

The bishop then says (and this is almost a verbatim rendering of what I’ve been told over the years), “It’s okay. You have a stronger testimony than you know.” Or, “Don’t worry; we’re all on the same path.” Or, “Well, you’re not alone. . . . If you only knew.”

SUGGESTION NO. 5. *As you listen to the detailed interview questions, it might help to recognize that the interviewer is mostly interested in sensing positive affirmations in the following general areas:*

- a. *That you are trying to be a faithful follower of Christ and his teachings;*
- b. *That there are no grievous sins or problems that need to be cleared up before you go to the temple;*
- c. *That you are trying to meet your responsibilities to your spouse, your family, and to the Church; and*
- d. *That you want to have a recommend and go to the temple.*

Pontius’ Puddle



Some years ago, one very fine woman, a friend of our family who had recently been married in a civil ceremony, told me that her husband wanted their marriage to be sealed in the temple, that he was uncomfortable not being married in the temple. But, like many borderlanders, she had reservations, questions about some aspects of her Mormonism, and didn't think she should go through with it. She felt somehow that she wouldn't be going to the temple for the "right reasons," and she questioned her worthiness as reflected in the specific questions of the interview. She wondered what to do.

I told her that I couldn't think of a better reason to be sealed to her husband than to strengthen their spiritual bonds and to help him calm his anxieties about eternal togetherness, family unity, and salvation. She went ahead, they received their temple sealing, and she has never regretted her decision.



Designating tithing. The current policy and tradition is to not divulge how our tithing is spent. Many of us in the borderlands might be more happy as full tithe payers if we could simply designate part of it to certain broad categories such as welfare, aid to disaster victims, or education.

SUGGESTION NO. 6. *Since we know tithing dollars are already being spent in these areas, perhaps it would be helpful to simply envision that your particular donation is being spent in the area of your greatest interest or concern. If you like missionary work, for example, envision (in some detail) that your tithing has gone directly toward supporting "two missionaries in Bolivia."*



Selecting local leaders. Many borderlanders would like the opportunity to be involved in the selection of their local leaders. I might be wrong, but I think the selection policy for bishops and other ward callings is not established in holy scripture. More likely, today's policies evolved from traditions established many years ago. There is no prohibition that I know of that would preclude someone from influencing such decisions.

SUGGESTION NO. 7. *Where you recognize a fine person whom you believe would make a great leader, drop a confidential note to your bishop or stake president. They are always open to receiving positive and uplifting input from any legitimate source.*

I COULD go on with more examples, but I think these illustrate the point I'm trying to make: we can take responsibility for influencing how policies and traditions are applied at our local level. We can examine how policies and traditions affect us and then decide how best to respond. In some cases, we might even be prompted to ask our general Church leaders to examine current traditions and policies that we believe may need change. This is usually best handled by working through appropriate channels and by writing thoughtful letters.

In closing, I re-emphasize my strong sense that most borderlanders support the Church, its traditions, and policies. Most of us are happy and proud to be considered part of the group, even though we sometimes feel as if we're on the edges. Again, this column is not meant to be critical, but simply to voice and explore issues about policies and traditions that sometimes make our Mormonism feel less welcoming both to us and to those we hope to influence for good.

In the next column, I'll share comments I've received and excerpts from correspondence related to "Jessica's" borderlands experience described in the March 2004 column. ☺

NOTE

1. In the first column, we introduced the borderland m<jeff@eburton.com> usual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria.

Please send me
any of your thoughts,
experiences,
or tales from life in
the Borderlands.

D. Jeff Burton
2974 So. Oakwood Dr.
Bountiful, Utah 84010
or email:
<jeff@eburton.com>