

**A 2020 Call**

D. Jeff Burton

---

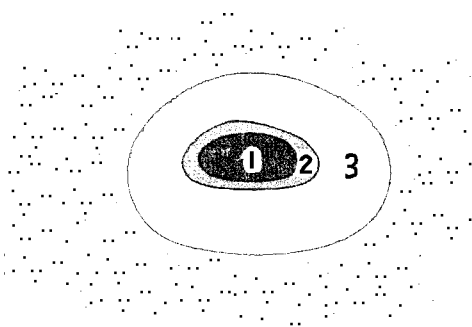


Figure 1. Membership Groups

1 — Core members: True believers; unwaveringly supportive; the acceptable.

2 — Borderlands members: Those who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church but who don't fit comfortably in Group 1.

3 — Members-of-Record Only: Non-participants, non-believers, non-supporters.

Dots— Previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

---

There is a saying to the effect that "rich men feel no temptation to steal bread." In a similar way, well-positioned men at the local level often feel no temptation to question the system that grants them power and to make clear their true feelings and beliefs. Many Borderlanders have had this experience, myself included.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to share with you a story that dovetails nicely with the themes of this column and this issue of the magazine.

**A 2020 CALL**

The door opened slowly into an office suite on the top floor of the Church Administration Building in Salt Lake City. The security escort waved a farewell. "Nice to have known you folks," he said with a smile. Responding to his visitors' blank looks, he said more seriously, "Men are never the same after they receive a call from this office."

R. Grant Ellison and Sister Ellison stepped hesitantly into a spacious outer office. The deep carpet—rich burgundy-and-white sculptured

wool—accented the well-rubbed walnut trim and hand painted wall paper. Heavy lace curtains from an earlier era framed large wooden windows overlooking the flower-covered plaza outside.

Darkened oil paintings of early Church leaders hung heavily on the south wall, while glass cases displayed an original of the Book of Mormon and other early Church documents on the east. Light from the ancient cases cast a warm incandescent yellow glow on the wall behind. The office itself had been remodeled six years ago in 2014 as part of many changes in the Church during those years and was presently lit by a blue-white laser chandelier. The new light clashed uncomfortably with the old in Ellison's mind. "I'll take the traditional any time," he thought.

The receptionist smiled and disappeared through a small door. Grant waited quietly, his faithful wife and companion at his side. Tall, handsome, muscular but sagging, graying at the temples, and dressed in a tailored, dark gray suit, he looked much like a bank president or Congressman. He shifted his weight to his right foot—his left knee had been bothering him since a bad fall at a branch meeting house during his early forties, and it often hurt under a full load. Elevating the foot helped, but that was unthinkable here.

A large double door opened and a gentle elderly man shuffled through. Ellison had never been in the man's immediate presence before, but he quickly recognized the distinguished ninety-six-year old President and Prophet of the Church, now 22 million members strong. Grant's legs stiffened and his cheeks flushed. He took his wife Anna's arm, knowing that she'd be needing his support.

Sensing the tension, the President spoke in a soft, reassuring tone. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I've been looking forward to seeing you. Please, come in." He grasped the arms of the Ellisons, separating them. With his thin hands at their waists, he gently led them into his inner office toward three high-backed chairs at the side of his large, glass-topped desk. Directly in front of the desk was a dark leather chair obviously used for ordinations and blessings.

The Prophet asked them to turn their chairs

so they all sat facing each other. Their knees were only a few inches apart, their chairs forming a perfectly equal triangle on the soft carpet. He smiled. His well-known weathered face and white hair were even more striking in person. “President Ellison, we’ve watched you and Sister Ellison for a number of years now. We know of your accomplishments, your devotion to the gospel, and your unquestioning support of the leadership of the Church.” He paused. “We have something to suggest to you and Sister Ellison.”

Grant wiped his now-damp hands together. This has to be a call to be an Authority of some kind, he thought. He had served as a bishop, a stake president, a mission president in Germany, and was now a full-time Church leader and employee in London. Anna had served faithfully at his side, becoming a recognized leader in her own right. She was serving on the Relief Society General Board, looking after its interests in the British Isles. She had also become a Director of the UN’s Office of International Understanding, a position of considerable visibility in the UK. She was a real asset to Grant in his increasingly important callings in the Church.

The President continued. “Sister Ellison, will you support your husband in any position we call him to?”

Anna K. Ellison responded without hesitation. “Of course.” She sat erect in her chair, her smile serene and pleasant. Her hair was immaculate, her British clothes cut just right, and her hands rested calmly in her trim lap.

Everyone smiled.

“Brother Ellison, will you support your wife in any position we may call her to?”

Ellison felt a slight pain in his left ankle. He rubbed it a little and said, “Why... yes... certainly.” He had heard that some calls were introduced like this.

“Well, I have a proposal for you,” he said. “Last month it was suggested to the First Presidency that another person be called into the general leadership of the Church. We have discussed this call with the Twelve. They are in harmony with what we propose to do.” The Prophet searched in his coat pocket for a sheet of paper. The air in the spacious inner office

seemed strangely electric. Grant leaned forward a little.

The Prophet read carefully from the paper. “Anna Kandell Ellison, it is proposed that you be called to the position of ‘Church Ambassador to Europe.’ This calling reports directly to the First Presidency.” He paused and looked at Grant. “Brother Ellison, it is proposed that you be released from any present callings to support your good wife. She’s going to need your strength, your love, your experience, and your priesthood.”

Everyone exchanged glances. Anna looked at him closely. Grant slumped slightly, and looked blankly at the Prophet.

The President’s kind voice loosened the tension. “No need to answer just yet. You’ll both need to think a little about it, I’m sure. Perhaps a little background information will help you understand the importance of this call.” He leaned over to his desk and touched a button. “John, please have Lynn J. Maynard join us.” Turning to the Ellisons, he continued, “Lynn is one of my assistants. I want you to understand how the idea for this proposed call came about.”

Brother Ellison leaned back, folded his arms on his chest, and choked down a cough. Lifting his left foot onto his right knee, he rubbed the tender ankle. His gaze wandered about the room, finally fixing on an early photograph on the President’s desk of him and his beloved wife. She was clinging to the President’s arm, looking lovingly into his face. That’s the way things should be, Grant thought.

Lynn Maynard, tall and stately, entered and moved holding a thin lapscreen. She was well prepared for her presentation which she supported with lapscreen graphs and charts. “As you know,” she began, “The world and the Church have changed a great deal during the second decade. We’ve become more of a diverse, faith-based religion, one more centered at the local level on Jesus’s teachings, and one that is now popularly seen to be ‘as good as it is true.’

“Partly as a result, just since 2012, we’ve seen great growth in developed countries like Japan, Canada and the UK—with over a million new members in Europe alone. The Church’s increased influence in Europe is also being

noticed by many ecclesiastical and government leaders, requiring our greater attention and....” Maynard pushed smoothly through her presentation.

Grant was not listening very closely. “Why me, God?” he prayed silently. He imagined himself following Anna into church and government buildings and being introduced as “Ambassador Ellison’s husband.” He saw himself addressing smiling Church members while they patiently waited for Anna K. Ellison to take the podium. He imagined waiting for her in hotel rooms while she attended important meetings and then hearing her say, “I’m sorry, but what we discussed is confidential...I can’t say anything just yet.” He choked on that thought.

Where would his life go now? His Church career, whatever was left of it, would be overshadowed by Anna’s position. He would have to defer to her needs, instead of she to his. His unspoken dream of rising to greater and greater service was turning into a nightmare—an uncontrollable plummeting into obscurity. He had a sudden urge to jump up, escape the room, and quit the Church. This last shocking thought—impossible only moments ago despite years of unspoken questions and secret personal concerns—shook him like blue-sky thunder and his attention flashed back to Sister Maynard.

“...and so we’ve found the new Church Ambassadorship an excellent bridge to leaders around the world,” Lynn Maynard continued. “It’s opened many doors and helped us solve many problems. Ambassador Ellison will be the third Ambassador called.”

The Prophet smiled. “They haven’t accepted yet.” He thanked Sister Maynard and invited her to chat for a moment with Anna. Then he stood and took Grant by the arm, moving him to the windows overlooking the plaza. Through the imperfect old glass they could see people passing just outside, some intently heading for the temple, others for the City Creek complex, others seemingly with no destination in mind. None knew what was happening only feet away.

“You’re limping slightly,” the President observed, turning back from the window to face Grant.

“It’s a slight problem with my knee—a fall a long time ago.”

“I see. I hope you’ll be able to deal with it in the future. Brother Ellison, do you believe that God is making this call?”

The question flashed on Grant’s mind like water on a hot griddle. Do I? he wondered.

The Prophet immediately continued. “My years of associating with local leaders tell me you’re having a problem. Am I right?”

Grant knew he should say, “No, I’m fine. I’d love to do nothing but support Anna. I’m overjoyed at her call. I’ll do whatever is required to see her succeed. I know this is the best for the Church. I know the call is inspired. This isn’t about me.” Those thoughts were there but they were swimming with a lot of other, more negative, selfish, and doubtful feelings that Grant suddenly recognized openly. He knew how perceptive the Prophet was. He would feel Grant’s insincerity if he said what he “should.” Best to be honest, Grant told himself, finally. About 10 seconds of silence had passed.

“Well, President, it’s not going to be easy, that’s true. It’s such a change. It’s not that I don’t want this for Anna, it’s just that... well, pride might be one of my problems... and I’ve had some nagging questions... uhh... it’s going to be rough being in the shadows...out of the decision making..not being ‘number one’... not being in charge... taking direction from a woman.... I’m wondering. Honestly, I’ve been hoping for something like this for myself for years...and now... it seems... I just don’t know what to think, frankly.”

“Grant, thank you for being honest with me. This is hard, I know. You’re not the only one who’s experienced these feelings, believe me,” he said with gentleness and love. “You saw the photo of my sweet eternal companion and me on the desk. I keep that special picture close to remind me that we are all equal in the sight of God, and that we must trust Him, and that we must be honest with one another.

“That picture was taken on a Sunday afternoon many years ago. She had just been called to the Relief Society General Board, a tremendous opportunity, one requiring a lot of travel and sacrifice on my part. I was released as the president of an elder’s quorum,” he chuckled. “I felt some of the same emotions you

are probably feeling right now— frustration, doubt and concern; wondering what was going to happen to me. And it took me months to overcome those feelings and to let myself be honest with myself, and with others. But it's my testimony that such feelings can be overcome and must be overcome if we are to achieve happiness in this life and exaltation in the next."

Grant nodded, not quite satisfied, not quite understanding, but somehow hopeful now.

They walked back to the desk.

"Sister Anna K. Ellison, can you accept this call from the Lord?"

"I can, with Grant's blessing."

"Fine. And you, Brother Grant R. Ellison, can you accept a new calling, that of supporting and sustaining Ambassador Anna K. Ellison?"

"Yes, I'll give it my best."

"The Lord will help. I'd like you to join me as I set apart Sister Ellison. Then I'd like to lay my hands on your head and give you a special blessing, that you will be able to accept your new roles, and to understand their importance to the Church, to Sister Ellison, and to yourself.

"Sister Ellison, if you'll come forward."

---

1. In my first column (this is the 26th), I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual 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. See the figure. Copies of former columns are available free at [www.forthosewhowonder.com](http://www.forthosewhowonder.com).