

MATURING AND ENDURING:
DIALOGUE AND ITS READERS AFTER FORTY YEARS

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Introduction

Just about twenty years ago, the editors of *Dialogue* commissioned a general survey of subscribers. The results were published in the Spring, 1987, issue of this journal under the title, “The Unfettered Faithful,” intended to evoke an image of religiously committed readers who felt free to explore the issues and frontiers of Mormon thought beyond the conventional treatments in official church literature.¹ The purpose of the present article is partly to replicate and compare more recent survey results with the earlier ones. The title in this instance refers not only to the “maturing and enduring” of our faithful readers (two-thirds of whom are now older than 50), but also to the same developments in the journal itself, which has passed through many editorial hands and has survived more than one period of crisis in its forty-year history (even in recent years).² Another purpose for this article is to provide both a descriptive and an analytical overview of the traits and interests of *Dialogue* readers at the opening of a new century (as indicated, at least, by those readers who responded to our survey).³

The earlier survey was conducted entirely by mail during 1984. The database at that time included approximately 2,900 names, of whom four-fifths (2,300) were current subscribers and the rest recently lapsed. Persistent follow-up efforts produced an eventual return rate of about 60% of that database (~1,800), with no appreciable bias perceptible from non-response, except for an under-representation of Utah subscribers and of women. The present survey was conducted during 2005 with a data base of about 3,500, but this time including only about half that many current subscribers, plus another 300 whose subscriptions had lapsed recently. The rest were long-term lapsed or customers who had purchased something from *Dialogue* but had never really subscribed. Respondents this time were given the option of sending back paper questionnaires by mail or taking the survey on the *Dialogue* website. Despite strenuous follow-up efforts,

the return rate this time reached only 50% among current subscribers and about 30% among lapsed subscribers and others. Of those who *did* respond, three-fourths used the mail-back option, and one-fourth used the internet.⁴ Non-response bias was again apparent from the under-representation of Utahns and of women, probably because the addresses we had were in the husband's name for most of the households. Altogether, from the entire database, and from both mail and internet respondents of all kinds, we received 1332 usable questionnaires for analysis.⁵ On the whole, a question-by-question comparison between the 1984 and the 2005 surveys shows surprisingly few differences in responses on a percentage basis. We will point out some similarities and differences as we go along.

Effects of Respondent Type on the Results

Since respondents were of different kinds (current subscribers and otherwise), and had responded in different ways, we wondered whether our results had been affected by any of three factors distinguishing *the various types of respondents*: (1) whether the respondents who took the survey electronically (via our website) answered the questions differently from those who responded in "hardcopy" by mail; (2) whether the respondents who were lapsed subscribers answered the questions differently from those who were current subscribers; and (3) whether those who were long-term subscribers responded differently from those who were more recent subscribers. Comparisons of these three kinds determined that *on the whole, no statistically significant differences appeared in the responses to the various questions*.⁶ There were, however, a *few exceptions* to the "no differences" generalization, and those exceptions were as follows:

(1) As might be expected, those who responded to the survey through the *Dialogue website* were noticeably younger, in general, than those who responded by mail. They were also more likely to be male and returned missionaries, but somewhat less inclined than mail-in respondents to be "orthodox" in their beliefs about the Book of Mormon and about how to deal with church policies with which they disagreed.

(2) *Lapsed subscribers*, when compared to current subscribers, were considerably less likely to be regular readers of *other* LDS-related publications, as well (e.g., *Sunstone*, the *Ensign*, *Journal of Mormon History*), so it's not that they have been replacing

Dialogue with this other reading. “Lapsers” were also somewhat more likely than others to be female and to be in their middle years (ages 31-50), when many of life’s stresses seem greatest; but somewhat *less* likely (60% vs. 72%) to regard *Dialogue*’s tone and content as objective and independent; or to say that *Dialogue* contributed to their spiritual experience.

(3) The *length of subscription*, among all respondents, was positively correlated with age, sex (male), and educational attainment. Also, shorter-term subscribers were *more* likely than longer-term ones to visit the *Dialogue* website; to prefer issues of *Dialogue* devoted to single themes (as opposed to varied content); and to be interested in downloading individual articles. Short-termers were *less* likely, however, to be readers of other LDS-related publications, or to find “most” enjoyable the personal essays, book reviews, and letters published in *Dialogue*. In response to the question about how they had first learned of *Dialogue*, most cited friends and family members, no matter how long they had been subscribers. A surprising number of subscribers, however, under “Other,” wrote in that they had first learned about *Dialogue* from classmates in LDS institutes, at BYU, or at other colleges. Only “charter” subscribers in any numbers (20%) cited “advertisements” as their first contact with *Dialogue* – referring perhaps to the start-up ads circulated in 1965.

These few differences in responses by subscriber type, as revealed in the above three paragraphs, are not of the kind or magnitude as might make it difficult to generalize about what sorts of people read *Dialogue*, so let us proceed at the outset to a fairly high level of generalization.

*The Modal Dialogue Reader*⁷

If responses to our questions were not much affected by currency or recency of subscription, or by paper vs. electronic response to the questionnaire, then how might we generalize about our subscribers? What other characteristics would go into a “portrait” of the most common kind of *Dialogue* subscriber today (at least among those who responded to our questionnaire)? The modal respondent is a home-owning, married man over fifty years of age with a post-graduate degree and is approaching retirement, if not already retired. He is a resident of either Utah or California, a life-long member of the

LDS Church, and a returned missionary, who attends Sacrament Meeting virtually every week. He regularly reads the *Ensign* and many other religion-oriented publications besides *Dialogue*, of which he reads half or more of every issue; and he has been a subscriber for at least 10 years. He finds the editorial tone and content of *Dialogue* to be generally objective, and he feels that the journal contributes to his spiritual and religious growth. He is inclined to be supportive of church programs and policies, though he might express some dissent privately to leaders before going along; and he regards the Book of Mormon as a divinely inspired document, even if it is not literal history.

Demographic Traits of Readers

About three-fourths of our respondents were men (perhaps an artifact of patrilineal household addresses). This is the same proportion as we found in our 1984 survey. Some 81% of our readers are married, again the same proportion as in that earlier survey (not much change in the other marital categories either).

We are not surprised to see that most of our readers are relatively old: About 64% are over age 50 (including more than 40% who are over 60). Almost exactly the same total proportion (60%) was *between 30 and 50 years* of age in our earlier survey. These are probably the same people, in large part, but just twenty years older, so we are still not reaching many in the younger half of the age range, especially those below age 40 (only 17% now compared to more than 40% in the earlier survey).

In our earlier survey, 55% of our readers lived in the Western states (Rockies to the Pacific Coast), and all the rest were scattered elsewhere. Now 72% are in the Western states (including 33% in Utah and 17% in California – i. e., half of all respondents). The rest are scattered around the country, with some *10-12% now found in the Northeastern U. S.* Fewer than 1% are in all the rest of the world combined.

Dialogue readers have always been well educated: Some 41% have doctoral degrees (about the same as in the earlier survey), and 31% claim Master's level education (up from 26% earlier). The proportion with degrees at the Bachelor level is now 21% (similar to the 1984 figure of 25%), but readers with no college degree are fairly scarce (now 8% vs. 12% earlier).

Home ownership is up a bit (90% vs. 82% earlier), probably a function of the ageing of the readership: *A fourth of today's readers are retired* from the work world. Proportions of readers self-employed and working for others have both declined in recent years in favor of retirees (again, simply a function of ageing). Sixty-four percent remain in the work world, and the rest are homemakers or otherwise engaged. *Only 2.5% of our readers are students.*

Variable Levels of Commitment to *Dialogue*

Maintaining Subscriptions

There has not been much change across the years in the distribution of our readers according to the *longevity* of their subscriptions. Now, as earlier, there is a dichotomous tendency – or perhaps trichotomous – such that a third of our subscribers have now been with us for less than ten years, and a similar proportion for 25 years or more, with another third in between. One in six is still a charter subscriber. Our newest subscribers (< 4 years) amount to more than a fourth of the total, so our marketing efforts are still having some effect (though this figure is a little lower than twenty years ago).

In our survey twenty years ago, only 14% reported that their subscriptions had lapsed. Today about a third of the respondents admit that their subscriptions have lapsed, for longer or shorter periods, and they offer a variety of “reasons” when asked to write them down. Many of these reasons could be regarded simply as pretexts that could be neutralized through skillful promotion and marketing, rather than as serious “explanations” for lapsed subscriptions. For example, a common complaint was a lack of time or money to keep up on the reading, which merely reflects priorities in subscribers’ lives rather than any disaffection with the journal. Other reasons commonly offered included a loss of interest in LDS matters generally, or in the Church itself, due to changed outlooks across time and life-stages. Quite a few blamed “circumstances” or their own negligence for the lapsed subscriptions, suggesting the continuing need for proactive follow-up on lapsers.

Subscriptions have not increased for more than a decade. Throughout most of its history, *Dialogue* (like similar journals) has suffered a normal annual attrition rate

between 10% and 20% from non-renewals, and these must be replaced with new subscribers if the journal is to survive. It is only the time, energy, and initiative of our Business Manager that have enabled *Dialogue* subscription levels to remain fairly stable in recent years at between 1,700 and 2,000. The increasing online access to all such journals is likely to undermine even further the appeal of hard copies in print, so it is a constant struggle to maintain subscriptions, and to increase them whenever possible. When we get new subscribers, they tend to come from about the same sources as twenty years ago. Some 57% report having been referred by family members, relatives, or friends, compared to 61% in the earlier survey. This suggests the need for special marketing efforts with current subscribers to get them to help recruit friends and relatives.

Reader Satisfaction

Two-thirds of our readers (69%) claim to read half or more of each issue of *Dialogue*, but they don't share it with others as much as readers did twenty years ago. At that time, only a third of the readers failed to share their copies of the journal with others; but now the figure is over half. That might not be so bad if it meant that the more possessive subscribers were inadvertently motivating others to get their own individual subscriptions. However, that does not seem to be the case, largely because husbands seem less willing than wives to share their copies of the journal! Among married subscribers, only 44% of the men share their copies with one or more others (presumably including their wives), while 60% of the women share theirs.⁸

It would be reassuring to know that a reluctance to share one's copy of the journal is an indication of sustained and intense reader interest; but alas, that would be entirely conjectural! We do have evidence, however, that readers truly enjoy the perspective that *Dialogue* takes. More than two-thirds of the respondents regard the content and editorial tone of the journal to be "objective and independent," while another 15% find that the tone and content seem to vary with the topic under discussion. Only 10% judged the tone "negative and hypercritical," and 8% made the opposite judgment of "bland and uncritical." This distribution of responses was very close to the same in the earlier survey, an interesting consistency in reader judgment across time. Those respondents who chose to amplify their choices with comments generally seemed to understand that tone and

content are bound to vary across time and topic. Perceptions about tone and content, furthermore, did not vary much by age or education level. Church attendance did not influence the “objective” verdict very much, but the “negative and hypercritical” opinion was noticeably higher among regular attenders than among others (12% vs. 2%).

A few readers felt strongly enough to write in special peevish comments about tone and content. These comments were far more likely to express irritation over negative and hypercritical elements perceived in the reading of *Dialogue* than over bland and uncritical qualities. Elaborations written in for other questions, too (e.g., “what would you most want to change if you were editor,” and “what would you try hardest to keep the same”), constantly stressed the importance of fairness, balance, openness to varied viewpoints, and the like, while also objecting to articles that seem negative and hypercritical about the Church. The latter objection occurred three or four times as often as comments calling for more pointed or “courageous” criticism of the Church. Aside from tone, the write-in responses also complained fairly often that some of the articles were too academic, technical, or over the heads of readers.⁹

Another indication of reader satisfaction is found in the responses to the question of whether *Dialogue* “contributes to the enrichment of my personal religious or spiritual experience.” A decisive 82% agreed with that statement, either strongly or somewhat, again an interesting consistency with the corresponding figure in the earlier survey (89%). This feeling about *Dialogue*’s impact on spiritual life was not related to age, education, geographic location, or mission experience, but it was a little more likely among women than men and among regular church-goers. This question on *Dialogue*’s spiritual impact, however, prompted an unusually large number of respondents to write in comments about the matter. The overwhelming majority of these written responses were elaborations on the “agree” responses – some of them virtual “testimonies” about the value of *Dialogue* to the reader’s spiritual growth. On the other hand, the *main* purpose for elaborating on a “disagree” response was to take issue with what seemed to be the *premise* of the question, namely that *Dialogue* was *supposed* to “enrich” personal spiritual experience. That is, these *disagreeing* respondents were not particularly unhappy with *Dialogue itself* but simply did not think readers should expect a *spiritual* experience from it – only an *intellectual* one. Interestingly enough, this kind of comment came both

from non-LDS (or ex-LDS) readers *and* from devoutly LDS readers (who simply thought readers should look elsewhere for their *spiritual* nourishment). Nevertheless, and somewhat surprisingly, nearly half of our readers reported using *Dialogue* material in the lessons they teach at church, at least occasionally!

PREFERENCES OF *Dialogue* READERS IN GENERAL

It is remarkable to see the stability of readers' preferences in *Dialogue* content across the past twenty years. When we compare their rank-ordering of "most" and "least" favorite topics then and now, the figures are almost identical! They still show rather strong preferences for articles on history, doctrine, and current social issues, though with some drop in the latter case. They like personal essays, book reviews, and letters to the editor. They look with considerably less favor on poetry, fiction, and articles dealing with the arts.

Table 1: Types of *Dialogue* Articles and Features Enjoyed Most

<i>Topic or Feature:</i>	<i>Percent of Respondents</i>	<i>Totals*</i>
History (Enjoy Most)	91%	1024
Doctrine	83	1035
Current Social Issues	77	754
Personal Essays	72	779
Book Reviews	69	631
Letters to the Editor	63	547
Science	55	696
Arts and Culture	26	664
Fiction	22	910
Poetry	9	935

*Totals of those who responded one way or the other when asked for the three kinds of articles they liked *most* and the three kinds they liked *least*.

Still today, as twenty years ago, two-thirds of the readers prefer each issue of the journal to have *varied* contents, rather than being devoted entirely to one topic. The single strongest preference, though, at 87%, is for issues containing *small clusters of articles* on a given theme or topic. At the same time, there appears to be some interest in *future books* made up of collections of articles on common topics or themes, taken from back-issues of the journal. (Write-in suggestions point especially to history, doctrine, and social issues as favored topics for such special collections). There might be a marketing

opportunity here for small print-runs of thematic books. Half of the readers said that they would buy such topical books (of reprinted articles), even if they could download their own copies of individual articles from the *Dialogue* DVD or website.

Other Mormon Oriented Reading by *Dialogue* Readers

Readers of *Dialogue* read fairly broadly in related publications as well. Since our survey twenty years ago, there have been some changes, but usually not large, in the resort of our readers to *other* LDS-oriented literature, both official and “unsponsored.” Two-thirds (68%) reported subscribing to (or regularly reading) the *Ensign* (compared to 77% in the earlier survey). Other literature published under LDS Church and/or BYU auspices, and consulted by our readers, include *BYU Studies* (29% vs. 34% earlier); *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (17%); and *FARMS Review of Books* (13%). The last two, of course, were only just getting started twenty years ago.

Of the “unsponsored” literature, the biggest overlap occurs with *Sunstone*, which is regularly read and/or subscribed to by 68% of our *Dialogue* readers (up from 60% in the earlier survey). A fourth of our subscribers also get the *Journal of Mormon History* (25%, up from 20% earlier). We seem to have benefitted mutually from our various collaborations with *Sunstone* and the MHA. Our readers also subscribe to the *Utah Historical Quarterly* (13%, down from 18% earlier); the *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* (9%, scarcely read earlier); *Irreantum* (the AML journal – 9%, scarcely read earlier); and the electronic *FAIR Journal* (6%, non-existent earlier). However, in the case of *Exponent II*, only 17% of our readers report subscribing, down from 43% in the earlier survey (a drop perhaps attributable largely to editorial difficulties at *Exponent II*).

Besides the list of Mormon-related journals and magazines provided for readers to check off in responding to this question, the survey invited them also to write in lists of “Other” periodicals that they were regularly reading. Unfortunately, the question did not specify that it was referring to “Other” literature of a *religious* kind, so respondents listed an enormous variety of periodicals of all kinds, professional and popular, religious, political, social, literary, and even hobby-related. The religious periodicals they wrote in included some of the newer Mormon-related ones (e. g. *Mormon Historical Journal*) as

well as non-Mormon (e. g. *Christianity Today*). A number of electronic journals or sites were also listed (e. g. *Meridian, Times & Seasons*). *Dialogue* readers are especially focused on religion, but clearly they are widely read in many other fields as well.

Variations by Age and Sex in Reader Preferences

Age Differences

Age and length of subscription are obviously somewhat related, so correlations of responses by subscriber longevity often track those related to age.¹⁰ However, neither age nor subscription length produced many important differences in how respondents answered the survey questions. For example, age was not a factor in readers' perceptions about the tone and content of *Dialogue*, or about the influence of the journal on their personal spiritual experience. In reader *preferences*, though, younger readers did not seem to favor Personal Essays and or Book Reviews as much as older readers did. The older the readers, the *more* likely they were to enjoy Letters to the Editor, but the *less* likely to enjoy Fiction. Otherwise, age made little difference in such preferences.

Table 2: *Dialogue* Content Preferences by Age of Subscribers

<i>Topic or Feature:</i>	<30 years	31 to 40	41 to 50	51 to 60	>60 years	N**
History (enjoy most)	85%	87%	91%	91%	93%	1007
Doctrine	82	85	85	82	81	1018
Current Social Issues	79	79	73	80	75	743
Personal Essays	59	63	64	77	77	764*
Book Reviews	50	51	65	64	79	617*
Letters to the Editor	52	40	56	64	74	537*
Science	55	52	60	53	54	638
Arts and Culture	25	43	23	23	23	650*
Fiction	32	27	28	20	18	896*
Poetry	7	12	8	6	10	917

* Statistically significant <.05 probability level

** Totals of those who responded one way or the other when asked for the three kinds of articles they liked *most* and the three kinds they liked *least*.

Age did seem to affect the sheer number of *other* religion-related journals to which readers subscribed: The older the readers, the more subscriptions they had – perhaps a simple function of financial resources. We wondered, however, if the *kind* of

journal to which readers subscribed (besides *Dialogue*) might differ according to age. To examine this possibility, we first divided the other journals into three kinds: (1) “Faith-promoting” (*Ensign*, *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, *FARMS Review of Books*, and *FAIR Journal* (electronic)); (2) “Neutral” (*Journal of Mormon History*, *Utah Historical Quarterly*, *Irreantum*, and *AMCAP Journal*); and (3) “Edgy” – meaning somewhat adventurous intellectually. This rank-ordered trichotomy was definitely correlated with age in perhaps a surprising way: The *older* the readers, the *less* likely they were to subscribe only to the “faith-promoting” literature (see the first row in Table 3), and the *more* likely they were to subscribe to *all three* kinds of journals, *including the “edgy” ones* (third row). Otherwise, age made little difference.

Table 3: Resort to Other Kinds of Literature on Mormons According to Age*

<i>Category of Other Literature:</i>	<30 years	31 to 40	41 to 50	51 to 60	>60 years
Faith Promoting only	36%	25%	15%	17%	12%
Faith Promoting & Neutral	6	11	4	3	5
Faith Promoting, Neutral, & Edgy Combinations	38	45	56	57	63
Neutral only	2	2	2	1	2
Neutral <i>and</i> Edgy	2	5	5	6	4
Edgy only	17	14	18	17	15
N (100%) =	53	133	226	272	522

*All significant at the 0.0001 probability level

Our *younger* readers were also distinguished by certain personal characteristics: They were somewhat less likely to live in Utah, more likely to live in the northeastern United States, and more likely to be female than were older readers. They were also far more likely to have responded to our questionnaire electronically and to have visited the *Dialogue* website frequently, compared to older readers. These differences by age might suggest a somewhat different “profile” for *Dialogue* readers after another twenty years.

Differences between Men and Women

The gender factor obviously makes more difference than the age factor in influencing the tastes of *Dialogue* readers. Women seem to share men’s strong interest in

history, doctrine, and book reviews, but not by such large margins, and in science not strongly at all. On the other hand, women are far more interested than men in personal essays, fiction, poetry, and the arts, and even more interested than men in current social issues (see Table 4).

Table 4: Dialogue Content Preferences by Sex

<i>Topic or Feature:</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>N**</i>
History (Enjoy Most)	94%	81%	1024*
Doctrine	85	74	1035*
Current Social Issues	72	86	754*
Personal Essays	65	86	779*
Book Review	73	57	631*
Letters to the Editor	66	58	547
Science	65	27	696*
Arts and Culture	18	50	664*
Fiction	16	38	910*
Poetry	5	20	935*

*Significant variation at the $p=0.0001$ level. .

** Totals of those who responded one way or the other when asked for the three kinds of articles they liked *most* and the three kinds they liked *least*.

Men and women were not very different in their judgments about the tone and content of *Dialogue*: By large margins, both genders found the articles generally to be objective and independent; but men were twice as likely as women (11% vs. 6%) to find *Dialogue* hypercritical and negative. Nor did men and women differ much in their belief (by 80% or more) that *Dialogue* has contributed to their personal spiritual experience, but women were somewhat less likely to resort to the journal in preparing their church lessons or talks – perhaps because their teaching assignments more often involve youth or children. As for their tastes in *other* LDS-related literature (faith-promoting, neutral, or edgy), men and women did not differ to any significant extent.

Finally, the two genders differed somewhat, but not a great deal, in their patterns of subscription to *Dialogue*: Women were more likely than men ($\frac{1}{3}$ vs. $\frac{1}{4}$) to have been short-term subscribers (< 4 years), and a little more likely to have let their subscriptions lapse (41% vs. 32%). Both men and women are likely to read half or more of each issue of the journal, but women are more likely to share their copies with others (53% vs.

41%). Women are more likely than men ($\frac{2}{3}$ vs. $\frac{1}{2}$) to have first learned about *Dialogue* from personal contacts, who, one suspects might have been their husbands.

Religious Commitment and Its Implications for *Dialogue* Readers

Basic Indicators of Religious Commitment

Fully 90% of our readers are LDS, mostly “lifers” but including 11% who are converts. This compares to 94% twenty years ago. Some 6% or 7% of the readers have left the LDS Church, most of whom have reaffiliated with other denominations. *Only seven readers* (not 7%) claim RLDS affiliation (now Community of Christ).

Regular church attendance is down somewhat from what was reported twenty years ago but still quite high. Among today’s readers, 67% attend every week and another 12% “most weeks” (total 79% compared to 88% earlier – for all respondents, LDS and otherwise). Also, 61% of today’s LDS readers are returned missionaries (a question not asked in the earlier survey). Interestingly, however, 41% of even the *non-LDS* (probably former LDS) also reported having served LDS missions!

Table 5: Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services¹¹

(LDS and All Others)	
<i>Response</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Weekly or More	67%
Most Weeks	11
	(Combined: 78%)
Occasionally	7
Rarely or Never	16
N (100%) =	1307

Today’s *Dialogue* readers are somewhat less docile than earlier readers in their posture toward the LDS Church and its truth claims, though the difference is not what we might expect from the publicity given to dissenters in recent years. When asked what a church member should do “when faced with a church policy or program with which he or she does not agree,” 9% responded that a member should accept the church position and try to comply (compared to 10% twenty years ago). The next response category, however (“express your feelings to leaders but then go along”), showed some decline since the

earlier survey. At that time, 37% opted for that reaction to an objectionable church policy; now the figure is 30%. If we add these two categories together (“accept and comply” plus “complain to church leaders but go along”), we have a combined category that might be called “Supportive”(39%). In the 1984 survey, that combined figure was 47%. The other categories, indicative of more serious dissent (“dissent privately” and “gather support from others”), are now correspondingly elevated compared to twenty years ago (combined 28% then, 44% now). The “Other” responses written in usually said something like “it depends on the situation” or else were mixtures of two or more of the four standard responses.

Table 6: What Members Should Do When Not Agreeing with a Church Policy

<i>Response</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Accept on faith and comply	9%
Express feelings to leaders, but comply	30
Dissent privately but avoid open conflict	37
Gather support from others and petition leaders	7
Other responses (including mixtures of above)	17
N (100%) =	1166

The past twenty years have also seen some decline in the acceptance by *Dialogue* readers of the traditional LDS claims about the Book of Mormon. In the earlier survey, when asked for a “yes or no” answer to whether the Book of Mormon is “authentic in any sense,” 94% said “yes.” That figure now is still over 90%. Those giving the “yes” answer were then invited to explain “in what sense” they regarded the Book as “authentic.” Interestingly enough, more responded to this question about the *kind* of “authenticity” than had responded “yes” in the first instance, suggesting that some of those who had given the “no” answer still held to some definition of “authenticity.”¹²

The interesting change is in the *particular kind* of authenticity attributed to the Book of Mormon: In the earlier survey, 63% saw the Book of Mormon as “authentic” in the orthodox sense that it is a *literal historical record*, but now that figure is only 36%

(41% for LDS only). Apparently some of those who once accepted the literal historicity of the Book of Mormon have resorted to a less literal understanding while still accepting the Book's authenticity: The statement that "Its historicity might be doubtful, but its theology and moral teachings are of divine origin" now is the position of a *fourth* of our readers (23%), compared to only 14% in 1984. Even if we regard both of these first two categories as basically believers in the *divine authenticity* of the Book of Mormon, the difference between 1984 and now is still noteworthy: At that time, three-fourths of our readers were in those first two categories combined (77%); now the combined figure is 59%. Of course, the figures for the next two categories are correspondingly elevated: "sound moral teachings" (10% then, 13% now) and "authentic literary product of the 19th century" (7% then, 15% now). (See Table 7)

Table 7: Beliefs about the Book of Mormon

"Do you regard the Book of Mormon as authentic in any sense?" (If so, how)

<i>Response:</i>	<i>Nature of Authenticity</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>
Yes	Literal historical document	36%
Yes	History doubtful, teachings divine in origin	23
Yes	Moral teachings sound and pleasing to God	13
Yes	Not divine but authentic 19 th Century Literature	15
Yes	Authentic in other ways (including combinations)	7
No	Not authentic in any sense	6
N (100%) =		1261

The "Other" responses written in were mainly restatements or minor qualifications of the four basic choices offered in the questionnaire itself. No doubt the outpouring of scholarly literature on the Book of Mormon during the past 20 years (whether apologetic or critical) has had its effect on these figures. Some 70% of our readers say that such literature has influenced them "a great deal" or "somewhat" in their views on the Book of Mormon. Even those readers who claimed that they did *not* consider the Book of Mormon as "authentic in any sense" were asked to write in their

own explanations for (1) the book’s origin and (2) its contents. The written responses often conflated these two issues, but the most common explanation for the *origin* of the Book of Mormon (among non-believers) was Joseph Smith’s own imagination, though also fairly common was “I have no idea,” or something to that effect. As to *contents*, the written responses of the non-believers tended to offer the opinions that have always been the most common: 19th-century ideas taken from Smith’s environment, or fraud and plagiarism (though with no clear idea about the specific source of the plagiarism).

Yet even those *Dialogue* readers who have their doubts about the Book of Mormon as literal history cannot be considered inactive in the church, as the next table indicates:

Table 8: Church Attendance by Book of Mormon Beliefs*

<i>Attendance Levels:</i>	<i>Literal History</i>	<i>Teachings of Divine Origin</i>	<i>Other</i>
Weekly or More	92%	81%	43%
Most Weeks	5	12	16
Less Often	3	7	41
N (100%) =	449	287	425

*All significant at the 0.0001 probability level

The more “relaxed” definition of Book of Mormon “authenticity,” from literal history to simply divinely inspired scripture, is apparently *not* associated with a significant decline in church activity. Attendance weekly or more often is characteristic of 81% *even* of those who hold this more relaxed view. If we add together the figures in the “weekly or more” row with those in the “most weeks” row, we find that a total of 93% of readers in this category (“divine origin”) are regular church attenders, virtually the same as for those holding to the traditional literal history view (97%). Indeed, a majority (59%) even of those who attribute *no* divine origin to the Book of Mormon claim regular church attendance!

Religious Commitment and Demographic Variations

Religious commitment might be defined in many different ways, but the questionnaire we used in this survey permits us to define it only *operationally* and in terms of only three components: church attendance, acceptance of church policies, and beliefs about the Book of Mormon. However, rather than attempting to measure the

impact of each of these three commitment indicators *separately*, we have combined them into an additive and scaled index to create a composite *Scale of Religious Commitment* that takes into account the respective weights of each of these three indicators in a *cumulative* fashion. Thus the more “orthodox” a person is on each indicator, the higher will be his or her cumulative score in Religious Commitment.¹³ Table 6 shows how our respondents are distributed on this new *Scale of Religious Commitment*.

Table 9: Dialogue Readers on a Composite Scale of Religious Commitment

<i>Commitment Level</i>	<i>Percent of Total</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
1 Least	7%	83
2	14	159
3	32	363
4	22	246
5 Most	25	277
Totals	100%	1128

Measured on this scale, a third of our respondents (32%) occupy a middle category of religious commitment, but half are in the two highest categories (total of 47%). We discovered, furthermore, that this general distribution is only slightly affected by certain demographic factors, and not nearly so much by age as one might suspect. Table 10 shows that religious commitment rises in about the same pattern in *all* age groups (columns). The youngest age group has the largest percentage of any groups reaching the “most” committed category (37%), but otherwise there is really very little difference across these distributions by age.

Table 10: Religious Commitment Level According to Age*

<i>Commitment Level:</i>	<30 years	31 to 40	41 to 50	51 to 60	>60 years
1 Least	11%	8%	11%	9%	5%
2	6	9	12	14	17
3	30	40	33	30	31
4	17	19	21	22	23
5 Most	37	25	22	25	24
N (100%) =	54	141	209	246	469

* Statistically significant at the p =.051 probability level

Education level didn't make much difference in religious commitment either, nor did sex or marital status. Residents of Utah and of the Midwestern states appeared in the *two highest* levels of religious commitment more often than did readers from other sections of the country. Finally, and not surprisingly, LDS members, and especially returned missionaries, were the most likely to appear at the highest levels of religious commitment, whereas non-LDS, reaffiliated, and ex-LDS readers were most likely to appear at the lowest levels (an obvious artifact of the particular operational definition and measurement of religious commitment used in this particular study).

Influence of Religious Commitment upon Reader Preferences

Religious commitment obviously matters a great deal in the lives of LDS members generally, and it might make a difference particularly in how *Dialogue* readers look upon the journal. In applying our index or *Scale of Religious Commitment* to various questionnaire responses, we learned that it made little or no difference in many of the responses. For example, in their preferences for different topics in *Dialogue* articles (history, doctrine, science, etc.), religious commitment did not distinguish much among readers. In Table 11, however, we can see, for example, how reader attitudes toward *Dialogue*'s "tone and content" varied by religious commitment. At least half of the most highly committed had experienced *Dialogue* as "objective and independent," but a fourth of these found it "hypercritical and negative." On the other hand, the least highly committed had the opposite pattern: three-fourths found the journal "objective and independent," while a fifth found it "uncritical and bland." In general, the "objective and independent" verdict declined with increased religious commitment – a trend offset somewhat, however, by the positive correlation between religious commitment and "depends on the topic."

Table 11: Perceptions of Dialogue Tone and Content by Religious Commitment*

<i>Perceptions of Dialogue:</i>	<i>Religious Commitment Scale</i>				
	1 Least	2	3	4	5 Most
Hypercritical & Negative	1%	1%	2%	10%	25%
Objective & Independent	74	67	78	70	54
Uncritical & Bland	20	21	6	2	1
Depends on the Topic	5	11	14	18	20
N (100%) =	76	136	339	228	243

*All significant at the 0.0001 probability level

As we observed earlier, readers in general find that *Dialogue* contributes to their spiritual and religious experience. Interestingly, that perception tends to increase with religious commitment, but moreso in the *middle* ranges of religious commitment than at the very highest level. The same general pattern is apparent in the resort to *Dialogue* for material used in lessons and talks at church: Not quite half of the most highly committed report such uses of *Dialogue*, but more than half in the middle ranges do so, compared to very few at the lowest end of the religious commitment scale. This pattern suggests the interesting implication that appreciation for the spiritual contribution made by *Dialogue* to religious life is even greater among readers with *moderate-to-strong* religious commitment than among the *most* strongly committed.

A certain wariness about resorting to “extra-curricular” reading material among the most highly committed can be seen also in their relative lack of exposure to the recent scholarly and scientific literature on the Book of Mormon, which most of them report has influenced them “slightly or not at all” in their understanding of that book of scripture. (This is in contrast to the least highly committed, 52% of whom report “a great deal” of influence from such literature).

The same wariness among the most highly committed can be seen in the “other” kinds of religious literature they read: They were the most likely to subscribe exclusively to other journals of the “faith-promoting” variety, while the least highly committed were, as expected, the most likely to take “edgy” journals. Actually, however, most *Dialogue* readers were very eclectic in their preferences for this “other” literature: The largest

category of choice among the entire range of religiosity was the middle or “most mixed” combination, where resort clearly increased with religious commitment (Table 12).

**Table 12: Resort to Other Kinds of Literature on Mormons
According to Church Commitment***

<i>Category of Other Literature:</i>	<i>Religious Commitment Scale</i>				
	1 Least	2	3	4	5 Most
Faith Promoting only	9%	6%	12%	15%	30%
Faith Promoting & Neutral	3	1	2	8	10
Faith Promoting, Neutral, & Edgy Combinations	38	33	65	70	57
Neutral	3	4	3	0	1
Neutral <i>and</i> Edgy	11	11	6	1	0
Edgy only	36	45	13	7	2
N (100%) =	64	136	343	240	266

*All significant at the 0.0001 probability level

Some Implications of the 2005 Dialogue Readers Survey

Our readers are (perhaps not surprisingly) quite homogeneous in their intellectual outlooks and reading tastes. To some extent this is already apparent from the description of the “modal” *Dialogue* reader described above near the beginning. Demographic differences, such as age, sex, education level, region of residence – and even frequency of church attendance – which normally influence opinion and taste in the United States, make relatively little difference in the intellectual outlooks of our readers, for the most part.¹⁴ Given comparisons with the 1984 survey, this fairly homogeneous readership seems to have remained quite stable for decades. It might therefore be considered our *base constituency*. Any strategy adopted by the Board to increase circulation of the journal should perhaps look first and foremost at new potential subscribers with a similar “profile.” Any *broadening* of that profile should probably be sought mainly at the *margins*. Marketing efforts should always take account of the likely impact of any promotional or editorial strategy upon that base constituency, lest outreach efforts to very different kinds of readers should jeopardize the loyalty of the existing base.

The relative homogeneity of this base constituency includes especially a religious posture toward Mormonism that is fairly devout, though perhaps more in the nature of the “Liahona” type of Mormon than the “Iron Rod” type (with thanks to Richard Poll!).¹⁵ This posture can be seen in an embrace of the essential divinity of the Book of Mormon, if not of its literal historicity; in a high frequency of church attendance; and in a general willingness to support – or at least to accept – questionable church policies and programs, even if not unconditionally. This outlook, however, does *not* condone actions or publications that are perceived as attacking the Church or as scorning its truth-claims. A rejection of the negative and hypercritical came through again and again in the open-ended comments written by respondents on their questionnaires – and at a far higher frequency than the opposite kind of comment – namely, that *Dialogue* had lost its “critical edge” and become too bland.

Readers are not looking to *Dialogue* as a substitute for the *Ensign*, to which the great majority of them already subscribe; but neither are they seeking a vehicle to “reform” the Church or to “update” church doctrines and policies. Our readers expect and want treatments of difficult and controversial issues in LDS history, doctrine, and social life, but they want those treatments to be balanced, if not wholly “objective,” and they want more than one side of a controversy presented, preferably in the same issue of the journal. This characterization comes very close to a similar one summarizing the implications of the survey twenty years ago, and for most of the same reasons, which, in turn, seems a close reflection of what Eugene England and his associates had in mind when they founded *Dialogue* forty years ago.¹⁶ We have, in other words, a tradition. *Dialogue* also has an established role in the broader culture of the Latter-day Saints, described in positive terms even in the quasi-official *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, to the surprise of many of today’s readers and church leaders!¹⁷

Unlike the situation twenty years ago, however, our subscriber base now is heavily skewed toward the older age groups. There could be several reasons for this development. One reason, of course, is the natural ageing of the founding generation. Another might be the loss of potential subscribers from the younger and middle age-groups who became wary about *Dialogue* and sister publications after admonitions by conservative church leaders, starting in the early 1980s, became more pointed and stern

by the end of that decade.¹⁸ Still another reason might be the more critical edge that became apparent in a few *Dialogue* articles starting in 1993, and/or an inadequate program during the 1990s for building up subscriptions. Whatever the reasons, subscriptions to *Dialogue* began falling in about 1990.¹⁹ By the end of that decade, they had fallen to less than 2,000, where they have remained, more or less, ever since.

The younger age groups have been disproportionately affected by this drop-off: At present, only some 4% of our subscribers are 30 years of age or younger, compared to double that figure twenty years ago. Even those in the 30 – 40 age group account for only 12% (vs. 30% earlier). Subscribers in their 40s account for a fifth of our total (19%). Taken together, all of these younger age groups (20s, 30s, 40s) total 38% of our subscribers. The rest are over 50. It is not at all clear why *Dialogue* has not been attracting younger readers at the same rates as it attracted their parents' generation. There seems no reason to believe that younger readers have different tastes and preferences from those of older readers in the kinds of articles carried by *Dialogue* (to judge from Table 2), or that younger readers are looking for more “edgy” or adventurous articles (to judge from Table 4).

Somehow the students and other younger people among our potential subscribers must be attracted to *Dialogue* in larger numbers and convinced of the need to become and to remain as committed subscribers. They are crucially important to the survival of *Dialogue*, not only in the immediate future, but also because in the long run they are likely to become the well-educated and affluent supporters who will be able to keep *Dialogue* going as major donors, as editors, and as members of the board of directors. They need to take to heart the realization that without them and their resources, there simply will be no *Dialogue* to provide the rich trove of literature that they and their children will be expecting to depend upon.

Like other publications in the LDS “unsponsored sector,” *Dialogue* will always have to struggle to enlarge its subscriber base, or even just to maintain the present one. In this effort, minimizing subscriber attrition is at least as important as enlisting new subscribers. A comparison of lapsed subscribers with current ones indicates that the lapsed are somewhat more likely to be female, single, and middle-aged; to be reading less from *any* LDS-related publications; and less likely to find *Dialogue* articles

“objective.” However, the “reasons” given by lapsed subscribers when asked to write them down did not, on the whole, reflect disaffection with the journal itself so much as complaints about their own lack of time or money, their own oversight or negligence in failing to renew, or sometimes communication failures with the business office.²⁰

As for enlisting *new* subscribers, we can see from the questionnaire the importance of referrals from friends and relatives, which have consistently brought us about 60% of our new subscribers (judging from answers to “how did you first learn about *Dialogue*?”). Ads in newspapers and magazines have never proved very effective. Our relationships with such sister publications as *Sunstone* and the *Journal of Mormon History* have proved to be good sources of potential new subscribers. For *Dialogue* to survive to the half-century mark, it will need the subscriptions and support of a lot more people, especially younger ones, from the “market niche” already reflected in its current subscriber base, and from any others who see the value in what *Dialogue* offers. The board of directors and the editorial team, for their part, will need to remain constantly alert to cultivate and maintain a public image for *Dialogue* that bespeaks its tradition of religious and intellectual integrity, independence, openness, and balance.

NOTES

¹ Armand L. Mauss, John R. Tarjan, and Martha D. Esplin, “The Unfettered Faithful: An Analysis of the *Dialogue* Subscribers Survey,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 20(1):27-65 (Spring 1987).

² Some of that history has been provided in three important *Dialogue* articles by Devery S. Anderson: “A History of *Dialogue*, Part One: The Early Years, 1965-71,” 32(2):15-66 (Summer 1999); “A History of *Dialogue*, Part Two: Struggle toward Maturity,” 33(2):1-96 (Summer 2000); and “A History of *Dialogue*, Part Three: The Utah Experience,” 35(2):1-70 (Summer 2002). The same author promises additional installments of this history in the near future.

³ A general tabulation of the numerical results from this latest survey will be found on the *Dialogue* website. Go to www.dialogue.com and click on “Survey Results” along the left-hand column.

⁴ The research team for this survey consisted of the three authors of the present article. The survey “instrument” (questionnaire) was a slightly modified version of the one used twenty years ago. The conduct and management of all aspects of the preparation and mailing of the questionnaire, together with the follow-up procedure, and the processing and formatting of the incoming data, were all handled by Professor Robert W. Reynolds, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Weber State University. We are deeply grateful to that university, the department, and many of the department staff for their sponsorship and support of this project. John D. Remy, a graduate student in religious studies at Long Beach State University and a systems analyst in the Division of Undergraduate Education at the University of California-Irvine, prepared the electronic version of the questionnaire and processed the incoming data before transmitting them to Professor Reynolds at Weber State. His role too was vital in this project. Armand L. Mauss, Professor of Sociology Emeritus, Washington State University, provided general coordination for the project and wrote much of the final text for this article.

⁵ On questions calling for answers from all respondents, non-response rates on each question ranged from miniscule (much of the time) to 14%.

⁶ Note that *statistical* significance refers to the probability that a certain distribution of figures in a table could have occurred by chance. The higher that probability, the lower the “statistical significance.” By convention, the highest tolerable probability is .05, or five chances in a hundred. This kind of significance is different from *substantive* significance, which refers to how “important” a finding is in some sense.

⁷ As contrasted with “average,” the “modal” respondent is the kind that responded *most frequently*.

⁸ As for use of the *Dialogue* website, of course there wasn’t one twenty years ago. Yet even today there appears to be little resort to it by those who responded to the survey: 78% of the readers reported that they “rarely or never” visit our website, and only 5% do so at least monthly. Such an uneven distribution would seem to be simply a concomitant of the skewed distribution of all *Dialogue* readers by age. During the past year or so, however, the *Dialogue* website has been greatly expanded with new features and other content, and the sheer number of visits rose from 6,165 in April of 2005 to more than 9,000 in April of 2006. Yet there is more to the matter than the sheer number of visits: Purchases through the website regularly constitute from 20% to 25% of annual *Dialogue* sales. Many who are not actual subscribers to the journal seem to be seeking copies of selected articles or entire back-issues, as well as new subscriptions, DVDs, and other products.

⁹ Copies of the comments written in for these and most other questions on the survey can be obtained electronically by request to the Business Office. The concerns, criticisms, kudos, and suggestions in these comments are again remarkably consistent with those accompanying the survey results in the 1987 article, 54-65.

¹⁰ The close correlation of age and length of subscription is indicated by the statistics *gamma* (.68) and *r* (.59).

¹¹ The totals in many of these tables do not add up to the original 1332, since not all respondents answered every question.

¹² This discovery required that we *reclassify* some of those “No” responses on the initial Yes/No question into one or the other of the categories intended for the “Yes” responders. That reclassification brought the total of the “Yes” responses to 94%, the same as it had been twenty years ago – though now with far fewer of them considering the Book of Mormon as literal history.

¹³ Various forms of these indices are common in the social science literature, and a fairly simple one was applied in Tables 5 through 9 of the 1987 article (q.v.). The one used in this present article is somewhat more complex and refined. Readers interested in the details can contact the first author.

¹⁴ The reader will perhaps note that our statistical analyses have generally been limited to *bivariate* relationships (that is, one dependent variable *vs.* one independent variable). For a number of our dependent variables of interest, we did construct some multivariate regression equations, but they yielded little additional information or predictive power beyond the bivariate tables already presented, so we are sparing the reader the additional toil of studying standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients of dubious meaning!

¹⁵ See Poll’s classic article, “What the Church Means to People Like Me,” *Dialogue* 2(4):107-17 (Winter 1967).

¹⁶ Mauss et al., “The Unfettered Faithful,” 40, and Devery Anderson, “History of Dialogue, Part One,” 42ff.

¹⁷ See Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1992), Vol. 3, 1387-89.

¹⁸ See, e. g., Dallin H. Oaks, “Alternate Voices,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 27-30. See also the Mauss reflections, “Alternate Voices . . . The Calling and Its Implications,” *Sunstone*, April 1990 (Issue # 76): 7-10.

¹⁹ Devery Anderson (“History of Dialogue, Part Three,” 60) reports that by the end of 1987, the print-run for *Dialogue* had been built up to a level exceeding 5,000 (not all of which would have been for subscribers). That level has never been approached since.

²⁰ One gets a picture here particularly of harried single moms as a significant portion of lapsed subscribers!