



## THE DIVORCED LATTER-DAY SAINT

Gayle Norton

Two marriages, two divorces, and years of living alone had helped make my aunt an independent, matter-of-fact sort of person. But she seemed almost too casual that night in 1956 when she told me my wife had filed for a divorce in a Provo court. I'd been visiting my parents, hoping a weekend away from my own home would help calm a household troubled by a long series of domestic quarrels.

The following morning, when I found my house locked and the family car gone, I knew my wife and I and our three children would never again live together as a family. A call to her lawyer confirmed this. A week later I sat numbly in my attorney's office, tiredly agreeing to everything her legal advisors had asked for. It was her second divorce and, I supposed, she had known all the legal maneuvers. I signed the legal "agreement" not really knowing nor particularly caring what was in the print above my signature. Time had stopped for me. I was physically exhausted, mentally depressed, and spiritually dead.

The day my wife and children left Utah for her parents' home some 1,800 miles away, my aunt invited me to live with her. Her friendship ultimately proved to be my salvation. For it was she, a divorcee who had raised three daughters without benefit of husband or father and had determinedly and successfully remained active in the Church *despite* her marital status, who first introduced me to those who live in the "world" of the divorced Latter-day Saint. It was from her that I learned how to "fit in" to a Mormon community where divorce was regarded by most as a major sin. I met my divorced colleagues at public dances, in private home gatherings, and through an endless chain of introductions from my aunt who seemed to know every divorced man and woman in Central Utah. I was astounded at their numbers and even more surprised to discover *who* they were and *why* they had divorced. They came from every economic and social level in the Church. Among their ranks were sons and daughters and former husbands and wives of Primary and Relief Society president, Bishops, Stake Presidents and General Authorities. Many, like my aunt, had divorced more than once. In the courts, most had used or had been victims of the "mental cruelty" theme. In the next three years I met and talked

with hundreds of divorced Mormons whose grounds for separation had included almost every legal reason for which a divorce can be granted in any of the fifty states, including such charges as homosexuality, adultery, desertion, habitual criminality, drunkenness, dope addiction, insanity, impotency, and sexual perversion.

### THE GREAT SILENCE

I kept asking myself where all these people had been hiding and why I had not known of them before. I had lived in a dozen wards and branches in as many states during my twenty seven years in the Church and couldn't remember having met ten Church couples who had been divorced. For nearly six years I had taken all the required courses in religion and social studies at Brigham Young University and could not recall having heard or read anything about any great number of Mormons dissolving their marriage covenants. I revisited the B.Y.U. library, certain I would find in print articles on Church divorce which had never before interested me. I found little. So I began my own files. As I met and talked with other active and inactive Mormon Elders who had divorced I scribbled notes, wrote up individual case histories, compared their stories with my own, and clipped what relevant articles and statistical data I could find. Most of the women I dated also had been divorced so it was no great surprise to my parents or close friends when, three years after my divorce, I remarried another L.D.S. divorcee, who had a son by her first marriage.

Our first two years of married life were miserable. She had lived alone longer than I. And my abrupt entrance into her private world was severely discomforting to her five-year-old son, who had been raised in a small, fatherless apartment. Shortly after our third anniversary we went through the Temple. The significance of this ceremony inspired us enough to mutually resolve some of the problems which had been causing some of our unhappiness. But in our day-to-day relationships my wife and I observed that many of our tensions seemed to arise from the fact that we were a divorced couple trying to adjust our social and spiritual thinking and attitudes to a religious philosophy which, it appeared to us, had too little concern for the special problems of the divorced. We looked in vain for reliable, professional sources within the Church that could or would corroborate or dispute our observations. Each Sunday we spend forty-five minutes in a parent and youth class talking about ideal ways to raise our children in the Church, how to discipline them, and how to regulate our personal lives so as to benefit fully from the Gospel in our home. We heard nothing on divorce.

We read the pages of American professional journals on marriage, divorce and family relations and found numerous articles by Latter-day Saint authors skilled in these fields. But references in their writings to the growing problem of divorce among members of the Church were infrequent. Indeed, *none* of the several L.D.S. counselors and family relations experts who helped me with this article were willing to be quoted by name for reasons which one said "ought to be obvious." It seems odd to me that some of the world's most respected and eminent leaders in these fields are willing to discuss the subject of divorce,

but that they are so reluctant to speak out on one of the Church's most serious social problems. One of my closest friends, a man with his doctor's degree in marriage and family relations, said flatly, and with obvious sincerity, that his "professional career would be irreparably damaged" if he allowed his name to be used. "The danger," he explained, "is that when you talk of what needs to be done in this area in the Church, when you suggest in-Church training programs to help the divorced, when you mention Church-supported and Church-staffed marriage clinics and counseling services for the general membership, you are taking an unacceptable 'secular' approach."

My wife and I got little help from the pulpit since divorce is not, for Mormons, a pulpit topic. Neither are accurate and up-to-date data on divorce within the Church easily obtainable. Those that are available are not wholly reliable. So I began writing down what information I could get from these professional people. I reread the materials I had filed on divorce some ten years earlier. Then I took what I believe is the most direct and most accurate method to get current information on divorce in the Mormon Church: the personal interview. A year ago I began a systematic series of taped interviews among my divorced L.D.S. acquaintances. More than two dozen divorced couples lived in our small branch. Some were native Utahns who had been born and raised in the Church. Some had divorced and remarried as many as three times. Others had divorced and remained single. In ten months I made three trips through 27 states along the East Coast, Central and Northcentral U.S. and in six Southeastern states. I talked informally to more than 100 divorced Mormons and took individual interviews from nearly seventy, some lasting as long as three hours. I recognize the weaknesses in an unresearched sampling. But on two points all interviewees were in agreement: (1) more needs to be written and spoken within the Church on the subject of divorce to help inform our confidently married majority that divorce is not an ailment affecting an unorthodox few, and (2) some type of permanent administrative machinery needs to be set up within the Church to provide professional counsel and advice to members who have divorced and, more important, to help those whose divorces may be prevented if adequate counseling were available in the early stages of their troubled marriages.

Most of the people I talked with said that the few ascriptions made within the Church to this social dilemma are expressed in oblique terms found in Church publications or General Conference addresses. We who have divorced find little comfort in the exhortations of Church leaders that active Mormons must live so as to avoid the pitfalls which lead to divorce. While such advice, if taken seriously, could indeed prevent many divorces, that approach has obviously stopped the growing number of broken marriages in the Church. In our Seminaries, Institutes, and Church college and university classes, where many young Church marriages begin (and where some end), opportunities for honest and objective discussion of divorce among Church members have been shaded by the use of textbooks which, if they discuss the subject at all, are either outdated or make little reference to its effect on the Mormon community. A doctoral candidate in family relations at a Southern university, who did his undergraduate studying and teaching at Brigham Young University, said he was amazed at

the large number of his students who knew nothing about Church divorce procedures. This teacher served in a Bishopric in one of the B.Y.U. wards and was aware of several student couples who had begun divorce action.

"They simply regarded divorce as a social evil," he said. "Most of the couples I talked with had been married in a Temple. They did not identify that union as a civil act. Yet, many did not know if, or how, they could get a Temple divorce. Seeing a counselor or an attorney hadn't entered their minds. The question most frequently asked was 'What's going to happen to me in the Church?'"

I believe that if Institute and Seminary teachers and faculties at our Church schools and universities are sincerely interested in giving Mormon youth honest and realistic instruction and advice on courtship and marriage, they must include in future curricula factual material, accurate and up-to-date statistical data, and objective case studies on divorce in the Church.

We who have divorced are partially responsible for the lack of discussion or writing on the subject. Because divorce is such a personal matter, authorities asked or expected to help us with our problems often must rely on the few emotional details a distraught or angry husband or wife will give them. I have talked to few divorced persons who could tell me with any degree of objectivity why their marriage had soured. It is easier to blame an errant husband or a nagging wife than to honestly admit one's own personal weaknesses. And since one partner or the other usually leaves the community in which the divorce was granted, any benefit of doubt frequently goes to the spouse who stays behind.

When circumstances of a divorce prompt a Church member to move to another community to begin a new life, his only tie with his Church past is often his membership record, which lists his marital status as "Divorced." The Church and its transient divorced population both would benefit greatly if bishops and branch presidents were required to write a letter explaining *both sides* of a divorce. This letter could then be attached to the membership records of those who move to get away from some of the inevitable embarrassments of a broken marriage. It would also help those who eventually seek a Temple recommend for a second marriage and have to produce such information anyway.

#### THE PROBLEM OF ACCEPTANCE

As the divorced Latter-day Saint retells his marital woes to those interested and with enough patience to listen, he often seeks, but cannot see, the realistic application of advice or counsel hinged solely on admonitions to "pray, fast and walk uprightly, and all will be well." If he is honest with himself he is already aware that the absence or misuse of these religious regimens in his personal life have contributed to his dilemma. He longs for understanding, for acceptance and help to resolve his internal conflicts, and for counseling to help him find his "way back."

It is difficult, too, for many divorced Mormons to accept the fact that the Church regards divorce as a significant wrong, when most divorced persons, if they keep their membership, and if they desire to work, have little difficulty in continuing in Church positions or assignments they held before their divorce.

The introspective and sincerely penitent divorced Latter-day Saint, if he is determined to remain as active and faithful as his worthiness will allow, faces the day-to-day challenge of equating his personal failure at marriage with his role in the Church. I remember well the misgivings I had the week following my divorce when my eight-year-old daughter asked me to baptize her. I was somewhat reluctant to perform the ordinance, since I had been so recently judged unfit to be a father and husband. Permission was granted, however. I not only baptized my own child, but six other children as well, and was asked to give a ten-minute extemporaneous talk on the significance of baptism before the ceremonies took place. I should have declined. But I did not. And as I stumbled nervously through those few remarks, uncomfortably avoiding the gaze of my ex-wife, who sat in the audience with our two younger children, I wondered what others present would have thought had they known of our recent separation. A few days later my bishop gave me a recommend and suggested that I get a Patriarchal Blessing to "help you through your troubles." I did so, again asking myself why I deserved such favors so soon after divorce.



Time eventually dulls the sensitivity of being active without being part of the Church's most important organization, the family. One Elder I interviewed divorced his wife a year after he had taken her and their six children to the Temple. A few months later he remarried a Mormon divorcee from his own ward. Two of his children went to live with him and his new wife. And he continued to serve as a high councilman and a seminary teacher. His first wife, left with the other children, immediately cut her ties with the Church. (She had been a Stake Primary president.) Like so many divorcees I interviewed, she vowed she would never remarry. For months she lived in her bitter, lonely world, grumbling about the "injustices" she had to bear and criticizing Church authorities who were allowing her husband to exercise his Priesthood. Shortly, however, she remarried a much younger non-member, also divorced. He had children by his first wife. The couple are expecting their first child this fall. At forty, this former Primary president has begun a new family with a non-member husband. The three youngsters whose custody she had been given no longer attend Church. If any of them ever again becomes active it will require considerable forgiveness, much wise counsel and advice from an interested bishop, and some understanding by the members of the ward in which they are now living.

Such understanding is given some divorced Mormon couples, under even the most severe circumstances. A single Elder had an affair with a branch president's wife shortly after she and her husband had been sealed in the Temple. Civil divorce followed. The Elder and the woman married. They were excommunicated. They saved money to pay back tithing after the reinstatement



they so desperately sought. They attended Church regularly and made every effort to reestablish their reputations in their branch, even though the woman's first husband attended the same meetings. Slowly, branch reaction to the couple's acts changed. Within two years they had been rebaptized and reinstated. The former branch president remarried. Today, the original triangle belongs to the same branch. They work together in Church activities. Outwardly, other members accept the new relationship. This case indicates what can be accomplished in extreme cases when divorced couples honestly attempt to right themselves and where Church officials expedite the process of reinstatement if excommunications have taken place.

#### AN EMOTIONAL VACUUM

One of the greatest challenges the divorced Mormon faces comes when he seeks a new outlet for the love and affection he can no longer give to his or her spouse or to children separated from him. In most instances, Mormon morality survives the sternest tests of the newly divorced. For the first few months following separation, loneliness is incalculable. Divorced persons almost always have severed close ties with single friends. The happily married in the Church may extend sympathy or pity to their divorced friends, but in most cases there is no comfortable place for the unmarried adult who no longer has a wife or husband to help balance his social life. An emotional vacuum often stifles most natural affection for the opposite sex during the first weeks following divorce. Most of my interviewees reported total absence of any desire for physical affection. "All of a sudden, sex is not part of your life any more," said an attractive, twenty-five-year-old divorcee. "Even when I was having my worst marital problems it was not fulfilling, but it was a release of sorts. Right after my divorce I found the entire idea of sex repulsive. I wanted no part of it."

Another motherless divorcee in her early twenties expressed similar feelings. "I wanted to be open and warm. I want to now. But I am afraid to give a lot. Not because of a fear of another attachment, but because of further damage it might do to my emotional makeup."

For the divorcee with children the problem of expressing affection is more acute. If the children are young they may need a father, but few young divorcees are eager to remarry for that reason alone. They do not date soon for fear of what their children or parents or friends might say. They want to avoid any gossip which might make new relationships uncomfortable. Many divorcees with older children feel like the forty-year-old mother of two teenage daughters and a nine-year-old son: "I am not optimistic that my future will be any brighter. The Temple Endowments I have taken since my divorce have not quieted the fears I have of living the next twenty-five years as a parental spinster, playing the role of both mother and father. What man wants a middle-aged woman with three children? I have completely resigned myself," she says funereally. "The probability of my ever remarrying is zero."

Most divorced Mormon men also surround themselves with an emotionally empty cocoon immediately after divorce. Few have any children living with them. They come and they go as they please. And they find themselves "pleasing to go" where eligible females are. Though their moral behavior most often

continues to be guided by Church principles, they at least have an opportunity to court single girls without giving away any secrets of their past. One divorced Elder successfully dated an attractive girl seven years his junior. Her family and her friends encouraged the romance until her mother learned her prospective son-in-law had been divorced. Few L.D.S. mothers plan to have their daughters wed to a divorced man, orthodox or not. Many L.D.S. males recognize this hazard and either marry a divorcee or find a girl who will accept them without asking or wanting to know all the details of their first marriages and why they failed.

### SPECIAL PROBLEMS

The Church emphasis on youth activities places an additional burden on divorced parents who have full or part custody of children. One parent or the other may become inactive. But if the mother has full custody, and if she remains active, she may insist that her children be taken to Church. Legal directives which instruct one parent or the other to insure a child's regular church attendance seldom are followed to the letter. If, as is often the case, a parent sees his children only on weekends, appearance with them at L.D.S. services may be more of a strain than the parent (or the children) wishes to be exposed to. So he (or she) does not go. The effect of this action on the child is obvious.

Divorce also sets children of divorced Mormons beyond family nights, Scout programs, father-son, daughter-daddy activities, and family togetherness as the Church teaches they should function. In a fatherless home, priesthood influence and male leadership may come from grandfather, Uncle Bob, the bishop, branch president, home teachers or, as is often the case, from no one at all. Many mothers feel there can be no adequate substitute for an active, loving father whose influence can help stabilize and direct the home.

Divorce almost always splits the father's income. After "her share" is mailed off (a share which is assigned by most attorneys without regard for tithing) the half budget left frequently isn't split as it once was into tithing, fast offerings, or building and maintenance donations. Many L.D.S. divorcees regard alimony and support not as *their* income, but as *his* obligation. And, while some divorcees do pay Church assessments on it, many are like the young mother of five who said candidly, "No, I don't tithe on my alimony and support. I simply told my bishop there was no way I could balance Malachi's admonition against a budget that exceeds my income. Nothing more has been said about it and I am holding a position in the Church."

Such an explanation does not come so easily for the divorced L.D.S. elder who often must equate his inability to pay all tithes and offerings with his priesthood obligations. The Church suggests no sliding scale for court-divided income. And not a few elders make real sacrifices to keep their legal financial obligations, their Church contributions, and their personal budgets within the bounds of their income. If a man wishes to continue court-appointed visits with his estranged children, he almost always has to keep his support payments current.

THE POSSIBILITY OF CHURCH HELP

Those in the Church who live with the specter of divorce find no solace in the critical observations of those in the Church who do not. Among the latter are those who believe the major responsibility for rehabilitation rests with the divorced. This point of view is presented by an active Church member and close acquaintance who followed my interviewing project with special interest. He said, "I am certain that all worthy divorced couples in the Church (and I suspect there are few who can lay the blame but on themselves) will get extensive and justified compassion. But for the most part, the Church treats divorce as though it ought not to exist, or at least it is not a respectable state; the person who, through shortcomings, falls into that category will have to *earn* respect and stature in the Church." One of the Church's most eminent guidance counselors says he believes the Church "does recognize divorce and the problems it creates within the Church, but Church officials really don't make any greater point of differentiation between people who have marital problems than they do with those who have Word of Wisdom or morality problems."

But divorce is a *permanent* thing. It is not a Church obligation that can be written off with money, nor can a member's divorced status be eliminated by praying, fasting and attending all meetings. The emotional shock of separation, parting from loved ones, breaking up a home, living a life apart, remarrying—none is ever forgotten. If this counselor's opinion truly represents an official point of view it is, I believe, based on faulty logic. This respected counselor says if he were a presiding authority he would "deal with each individual on the basis of what his circumstances are or were and from the standpoint of Church doctrines and procedures.

"If professional counseling is available, fine. But there is no assurance professional counseling will be any more helpful to an L.D.S. couple with marital troubles than counseling they can get from their bishop or branch president. The question is, how much good judgment does a bishop or professional counselor have in any given situation? How well is that judgment applied to the situation? How willing are those involved to work to help solve their own problems?"

On the latter two questions I will agree with this counselor. But he errs in assuming that those of us with marital problems balance the judgment of our bishop or branch president against a professional person. To be fair, I must admit that many of us who are divorced are reluctant to go to our branch or ward leaders with our serious marital problems. A year ago my present wife and I needed special help and counseling. Although we had respect for the office and calling of our branch president and liked him very much as an individual, we knew our difficulty was serious enough to require more time than he had to give us. And, right or wrong, we did not feel we could share fully the secrets of our personal lives with a man who would be our branch president for only a brief time but who would perhaps be a neighbor and business associate for as long as we lived in our community. We sought, instead, help from a psychiatrist and marriage counselor who worked in cooperation with our county mental health unit. For the last fourteen months my wife and I have met for



an hour and a half each week with this man and four other previously divorced couples. Each in this group has benefited greatly from our informal visits. But my wife and I have wondered how much more beneficial this counseling session might be to us if all were Mormon. It would at least provide a base for considering the spiritual and eternal values of marriage, subjects which have never been mentioned in our present discussion group.

Widespread professional concern doesn't always mean full agreement on these issues, at least in the ranks of the active Church members working in counseling and marriage and family living. Three Latter-day Saint authorities in these fields told me the time has come for the Church to reevaluate the importance of professional marital counseling as a permanent adjunct to social welfare programs of the Church everywhere.

"I would like to think," said one L.D.S. marriage counselor, "that the average bishop is able to distinguish between those marital problems he can help solve and those he cannot. I would like to think that he would, in every case, ask: 'What other sources do I have in my community that can help this couple?' But many troubled couples, particularly those married in the Temple, go to their bishop and say, 'What can we do?' They want spiritual help, but at the same time they want good, practical advice. The Bishop can put his arm around them, pat them on the back and say, 'Brother and Sister Smith, go home and pray about it.' This supplies only one thing that couple came for. A bishop must give them additional help or get them to someone qualified to give it. In too many cases, married couples in trouble do not respect their bishop's judgment in these matters enough to go to him in the first place. So they don't go to anyone."

Another L.D.S. counselor who deals with in-Church marital problems says much of the information on marriage and divorce that goes to bishops and branch presidents is not done in writing. "I think the Church hesitates to put down any specific rule in this area," he said. "And yet there are rules. But they stay away from specifically ostracizing individuals. They say it 'depends on the situation,' an open-ended statement that can (and does) cover practically any 'situation.'"

The close acquaintance quoted earlier says if the Church were to devise education programs and policies on marital problems "the effect might well be to precipitate divorces. Hence, on mental illness and marital difficulties, the Church prefers to act as though they were not acceptable states of mind and marriage, so that few, if any, resort to such unrespectable situations."

Another doctoral student of marriage and family living who did his undergraduate work and teaching at B.Y.U. believes workable training programs could be set up within the Church for those called to counsel married couples in trouble.

"We need to assure that our bishops and branch presidents and other Church leaders are exposed to some kind of a training program that would at least help them learn to recognize marital difficulties and the problems of divorced couples. This would not have to be an all-out publicized program. We couldn't sweep into a stake and say, 'We're going to train all bishops on the fine art of spotting weak marriages and helping the broken ones.' But when an authority comes to

visit, he could bring with him some materials on a one-to-one basis, counsel and advice for high councilmen and bishops that could be filtered down to all executive positions in our wards and branches. Something has to be done. It is just sad it cannot be done openly.”

Many of us in the Church who have divorced think it is sad, too. And we are waiting.