

THE NEW MESSENGER & ADVOCATE

KEVIN BARNHURST

The New Messenger & Advocate

A magazine is supposed to be one of the easiest businesses to start. It requires no office, no equipment (printing and even mailing can be farmed out to local businesses), no staff as long as volunteer or freelance writers will do the job and only a small amount of ready cash. All it really takes is time. But who is willing to put in the time? This question is especially loaded when applied to independent religious magazines. Religion is a touchy subject even within the safety of official publications, as anyone on the church correlation committee can confess. And without official sanction, independent publications hardly have a leg (not to mention a budget) to stand on. With all the pitfalls of our sticky religious feelings, and no financial lure, it seems *miraculous* that any independent religious magazines are published at all. And yet there *are* *Dialogue* and *Exponent II* and *Sunstone* and newsletters and journals of almost a dozen Mormon associations. Now there is the *New Messenger & Advocate*. What is the sense in all this? Why do we do it?

The question crossed my mind while I was working for *Dialogue*. After all those sessions of sorting envelopes into zipcode order or processing address changes, and especially after the night we crawled among stacks of brochures until three in the morning, I wondered. I had subscribed to the journal for only a year, and frankly, I had found most of the articles rather dull and longwinded. But when the routine crises of publishing *Dialogue* arose—lost manuscripts, art not arriving, printing difficulties, writers' complaints—I felt each time more strongly that *Dialogue* just *had* to survive. For some reason unknown to me then, and not entirely clear to me now, the publication *had* to come out again. There always had to be a *Dialogue*.

My experiences with *Dialogue* convinced me that I should return to BYU to work on a degree in publishing, so I left Washington and allied myself with a small group of writers now called the Guild of Mormon Writers which was meeting monthly in Provo, Utah. The group was frustrated by the lack of outlets for our writing—especially because the publications that would print our stories and poems wouldn't *pay* for them. One member of the group had recently published his own book and needed a way to let Mormons know about it. I felt that *Sunstone* might also benefit from advertising, and a trial balloon sent to potential advertisers brought an excellent response.

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Professional organizations of Mormons supplied us with mailing lists in return for news coverage. The members of our writers' group provided the manuscripts—a rather varied array of popular magazine articles, news articles, a short story, features and poetry—which we printed along with the advertising. The result was the *New Messenger & Advocate*.

The first issue was mailed in June to over 10,000 Mormons in the United States. This gave us a chance to gauge what readers wanted us to print. We learned that American Mormon readers don't want general-interest features—they get all they need in the official Church publications. Neither do they want half-baked scholarly articles. If it isn't good enough to be printed in *Dialogue*, or other professional journals, it shouldn't be printed at all. What readers really want is news about that fuzzy interface between the Church and the world, an area that has been left in mystifying twilight by both official and independent publications, even by the *Church News*. American Mormons are flooded by scholarship, by creative writing and by internal Church news, but they really need to know about the area of friction or compatibility between being a Mormon and being an American. That may seem dangerous territory, but perhaps by using a straight news-reporting approach and occasional personal essays, we can cover it without offending anyone.

I and my staff are excited about publishing a new national magazine for Mormons, and we hope it will be successful. But if it isn't, we are prepared to stop publishing rather than become a magazine without a strong idea. Since I am largely responsible for it, I have viewed the idea with some distrust. My willingness to turn back at every juncture has been annoying to some of the staff members, who perhaps see the idea clearly than I do. But publishing, especially about religion, carries heavy responsibilities that no one can shoulder lightly. Although I am a publisher by trade, I prefer to use my leisure time writing, and I would find producing the *New Messenger & Advocate* an annoying task if I didn't feel some of the same devotion to it that I feel to *Dialogue*. My devotion is growing as the idea develops, and to my surprise I have found the same commitment to it in staff members. After keypunching thousands of names for the mailing list, one staff member said, "I don't know why I'm doing this. There doesn't seem to be much chance I'll ever be paid for it." But she seemed to think it *had* to be done, that somehow it was very important that it be done. The idea for the *New Messenger & Advocate* is still developing, but it does have some of the strength that has carried *Dialogue* through ten difficult years.

Ed. Note: Since this article was written, the New Messenger & Advocate has merged with Sunstone under the direction of Kevin Barnhurst, Scott Kenney, Peggy Fletcher and the staffs of both.