

Ongoing Dialogue

Since accepting the editorship of *DIALOGUE* last spring, we have had a number of close friends ask with an air of incredulity, “I think it’s wonderful, but why would you take on such an enormous job — a thankless task?” Others have wanted to know how *DIALOGUE* differs from other independent Mormon publications and what we hope to contribute as editors. We feel that we owe these friends and *DIALOGUE*’s readers a response.

As a young faculty couple at Deep Springs College in California in the mid-1960s, we struggled with important issues, both philosophic and pragmatic, where Church policy or doctrine and our own values did not seem to coincide. Less than an hour’s drive from our doorstep stood the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Natural Area where a dendrochronologist friend had recently counted tree rings in deadwood dating back nearly 10,000 years. Yet a local church leader believed the earth to be less than 6,000 years old — and suggested that if we were faithful we would too. We agreed with neither his notion nor his premise. Earlier, in another branch we had seen right-wing politics injected into church meetings. We felt strongly that neither an affinity for George Wallace nor an aversion for scientific evidence was an appropriate token of faith or righteousness. In fact, the intrusion of such issues as an implied test of faith inhibited understanding and destroyed the harmony of spirit that should prevail in a religious community. We didn’t know if others had similar concerns, but we hoped they did.

Then came *DIALOGUE*. Somewhere, we heard about the new journal and spirited our check off to Gene England in time to receive volume 1, no. 1. Loaded with thoughtful essays, marked by good scholarship, and sprinkled with pithy quotations, we found in the pages of that first issue and succeeding ones a creative synthesis of reason and faith, a winnowing out of myth and reality. By this time, we had moved to New Hampshire and the fifty-four-mile round-trip to church had begun to look like a graceful way to slip into inactivity. *DIALOGUE* helped us to reconsider. If others like Richard Poll, more experienced than we, could grapple successfully with their inner conflicts with Church practices and still feel at home in the Mormon faith, we could too.

Over the years, as issues like the denial of priesthood privileges to blacks rose in intensity, we admired the honest efforts of *DIALOGUE* writers like Lester Bush, Armand Mauss, and Newell Bringhurst to unravel the historic evolution of the Church’s practice and explore the implications of it. Again, *DIALOGUE* provided an avenue for the expression of concern and a forum to explore

alternatives. Our association with the Church became more satisfying with a growing awareness that one could care deeply both about the institution and about the issues that surround it.

Our interest in *DIALOGUE* is also related to our perspective on the organizational nature of the Church. Lay leadership at the local level means a democratization of the religious experience which is wholly in keeping with early Christian teaching and quite in accord with modern social theory. In keeping the Church an orderly and recognizable body, however, the leadership has stressed two things: 1) the training of laypersons — in which prodigious amounts of time and energy are invested; and 2) centralized control — reserving an unusually high proportion of decision making to General Authorities. While local leaders are trained and instructed as fully as possible, they remain plumbers, teachers, and physicians rather than theologians and counselors. But even at Church headquarters, authority is sharply focused at the top; for this reason, action rather than contemplation is the prevailing ethic within the Mormon community. As the institution has grown in size and scale, the need to train new leaders in far-flung places and to keep order in the ranks has become an overriding concern. Administrative instruction is standardized, Church publications are correlated and many members take pride that “the Church is the same all over the world” without asking how much sameness is desirable or even tolerable.

The character of Church organization has shifted towards authoritarianism and uniformity at the expense of individual expression and cultural diversity. We understand how and why this has happened, but we also believe that the Mormon community badly needs, amid all its frenzied activity, some dispassionate analysis, some thoughtful reflection, and some unfettered creative expression.

Churches with professional clergy have their professors of theology, church history, and social ethics. It is their business to think and write. Lacking this luxury in a lay church, we believe *DIALOGUE* provides within Mormonism a place for creative and reflective thought to be encouraged and expressed. The number of excellent manuscripts we receive suggests that there are many well-informed people thinking and writing about our theology, history, and culture — most of them out of purely personal interest. It seems to us, therefore, that *DIALOGUE* serves these particular purposes:

1) It offers substantive reading for educated members of a church whose official publications aim, by policy, at an audience that also includes the less literate and the newly literate;

2) It provides a forum for exploring the nature and implications of LDS Church history, theology, and current practices in an environment characterized by both intellectual integrity and good will;

3) It seeks to express creative thought, in literary, scientific, and artistic domains, for the enrichment of Mormon culture; and

4) It nurtures a community of responsible and reflective Latter-day Saints who find in *DIALOGUE* not only an opportunity to express their own ideas but also a chance, however unwelcome at times, to shape the culture to which they belong.

Given the emergence, after the birth of DIALOGUE in 1966, of related publications such as the newly revitalized *BYU Studies*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*, and the *Seventh East Press*, we are often asked, "How is DIALOGUE unique and what is its distinctive role?" In our view, each of the aforementioned publications fills a distinct niche and has an important role to play. DIALOGUE remains, however, the only independent refereed scholarly journal of Mormon studies. With no larger institutional ties and with sufficient solvency to escape dependence on major donors who might wish to influence editorial policy, DIALOGUE is at liberty to follow its own judgments and the advice of a professional board of editors. DIALOGUE is a general-interest journal devoted to the publication of scholarly and literary work; investigative reporting and current events are not our purposes. We are a journal rather than a magazine and see a healthy, complementary relationship with *Sunstone* in this regard. We also welcome in a collegial spirit the *Journal of Mormon History* and the *John Whitmer Association Journal*.

As we continue the fruitful course of DIALOGUE, we hope to build on the fine tradition of quality established by our predecessors, Gene England, Bob Rees, and Mary Bradford, who published manuscripts across a broad spectrum of interest from poetry to theology. At the same time, we hope to give voice to some of our own unsatiated interests, one of which is the beginning dialogue between Mormonism and the larger stream of Christian and even non-Christian religious thought. Others include the vexing but persistent dichotomy between individual responsibility and institutional loyalty, and at a more general level, the vital relationship between gospel ideals and Church practices. These are ticklish topics, very real in the minds and lives of many Latter-day Saints but frequently skirted by leaders when members most need to come to grips with them. We also hope to sound more profoundly the depths of spiritual awareness and experience within the Church. As DIALOGUE is the place to bring insightful examinations of doctrine and history, so is it the place to bring thoughtful expressions of the holy and sensitive sharings of the sacred. DIALOGUE must celebrate as well as dissect, rejoice as well as analyze.

We trust that this range of topics will bear with them a spirit of goodwill. Much good has arisen and will continue to arise from sincere efforts to understand some of the essential dilemmas of the Mormon religious, spiritual, and cultural experience.

We hasten to point out the obvious, however. We can't publish manuscripts we don't get. Our capacity to address these and other important topics in Mormon studies depends on the willingness of authors or potential authors to commit their thoughts to paper. We hope to continue the tradition of our predecessors in welcoming young authors, and if necessary, helping them to match the appropriate form to their content.

To assure DIALOGUE of a continuing infusion of new ideas and to avoid wearing out some of our best supporters, we have chosen to reorganize the board of editors. We have streamlined the number from thirty-one to twelve and invited these new members to serve rotating three-year terms. The new board is broadly representative of geographical, disciplinary, and philosophic

interests. We will work closely with its members and the executive committee in preparing future issues of *DIALOGUE* and in securing manuscripts from qualified authors. We hope to work the editorial board harder, release its members sooner, and, in the long run, provide an opportunity for more people to serve in a meaningful way.

As letters to the editor in this very issue suggest, *DIALOGUE* is regarded by some as being heretical — and by others as being pious. We hope the journal will be neither, although we will probably publish articles that may rightly earn either label. We should point out, however, that our commitment to intellectual honesty and balance requires the cooperation of our potential writers. Our purpose is to express and explore the breadth and variety of Mormon studies — not to defend or attack any particular doctrine or practice.

There are many who believe that faith and scholarship are at cross purposes. We believe this view is flawed. Faith provides ideals by which believers navigate their course. Scholarship, by contrast, helps us to measure our progress with some objectivity. Both are essential to thoughtful people and to the church. Scholarship and faith do different things, but we believe they may both be found in the service of legitimate religion.

Finally, much has been said about *DIALOGUE*'s move to Utah. Previously edited on the two edges of the continent by Utah-bred Latter-day Saints, it now comes to Salt Lake City under the direction of two people whose backgrounds are decidedly different — one is a convert to the LDS Church from Ohio, the other the active child of inactive parents in central Utah. Together, we have spent eleven of our nineteen years of marriage in the Carolinas, New Hampshire, Ohio, and California. Whatever significance can be attached to all this we don't know, but for those who wish some substance on which to speculate, we offer the information. Suffice it to say we are honored to have the opportunity to guide *DIALOGUE* around its next lap and we pledge to serve it with all the courage and integrity we can muster. Happily for us, the members of the executive committee, staff, and editorial board will insist that we measure up.