Lavina Fielding Anderson and the Power of a Church in Exile

Levi S. Peterson

OVER THE YEARS LAVINA FIELDING ANDERSON'S FRIENDSHIP and approval have helped me understand I am a real, if irregular, Mormon. It is therefore ironic that she, who believes so devoutly, has been excommunicated while I continue to enjoy the privileges of membership. She has told me of a friend who partakes of the sacrament twice each Sunday, once for herself, once for Lavina. May we all in some such manner support Lavina in her exile.

Lavina's parents are Herman and Maud Dial Fielding, who made their living by farming and who presently serve as ordinance workers in the Seattle, Washington, temple. Lavina was born in 1944 in Idaho. When she was twelve, her parents moved to Warden, Washington, near Moses Lake, where Lavina lived till college age. She attended Brigham Young University for three years, then served a Swiss French mission for the church. Returning to BYU, she received a bachelor's degree in 1968 and a master's degree in 1970. She earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of Washington, writing her dissertation on landscape in western travel literature. In 1973 she was appointed women's editor of the church's official *Ensign* magazine. For the next eight years her place of work was in the church office building. Here she enjoyed a lunch-time association with colleagues from the historian's office, which, during the early part of this period, was headed by Leonard Arrington.

In 1977 Lavina married Paul L. Anderson, a historic architect and museum designer. The couple bought an older house on Roberta Street in Salt Lake City from Marybeth Raynes and quickly evolved the tradition of sending an annual Christmas card bearing a sketch of the house or yard by Paul and an informative message by Lavina. Their son Christian was born in 1980.

In 1981 Lavina was dismissed from the *Ensign* for attempting to mail to *Sunstone* magazine a copy of a general conference speech by Elder Hartman Rector which had undergone a mandatory revision for publication in *Ensign*. (Interestingly, Elder Rector himself was sending out copies of his unedited talk to anyone to requested one.) Since 1981 Lavina has been self-employed under the professional title Editing, Inc. Working from her home in Salt Lake City or her summer home in Lamb's Canyon up Parley's Canyon, she writes and edits family and regional histories. She also does much voluntary editing and serves on many boards and committees. She is editor of the *Journal of Mormon History* and a member of the board of directors of Signature Books, Inc.

Her article "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology" was published in the spring 1993 issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. In the same issue appeared an announcement, co-signed by Lavina and Janice Allred, of an organization called the Mormon Alliance whose purpose is the documentation of cases of "ecclesiastical or spiritual abuse." Both documents figured in Lavina's excommunication, which occurred on 23 September 1993. Immediately following her excommunication, Lavina filed a thirty-seven-page appeal with the First Presidency, which the latter refused to review. She also returned to her ward as if nothing extraordinary had occurred. Since the time of her excommunication, Lavina has continued to be as active in her ward and stake as she is permitted to be. She has pushed forward the work of the Mormon Alliance and its *Case Reports*.

In a recent interview I asked Lavina to recount important incidents that had changed her into a dissenter. Though she was reluctant to specify single incidents, it became apparent there had indeed been incidents or episodes of an especially disillusioning quality.

One important disillusionment was her discovery at BYU that a faith-promoting story that had been told with sincere emotion by her seminary teacher during high school days was based on a historical fabrication. A more gradual disillusionment was her awakening, while she served in the Swiss French mission, to the fact that she was prohibited by her gender from exercising certain intellectual, social, and spiritual competencies. It was not merely that she was supervised by male zone and district leaders who sometimes seemed her inferiors. "It was the abstract fact that when a job needed to be done, before any question could be asked about who the best person would be to do the job—whose gifts, talents, experiences, and desires provided the best match for the demands of the job—not quite half of the people in the mission were automatically excluded."[1]

1. Lavina Fielding Anderson to Levi S. Peterson, 8 July 1995.

I asked Lavina whether her preemptory firing from the *Ensign* had been disillusioning. She said no. To the contrary, she was actually happy to escape the restrictions of a job where all materials had to be approved by Correlation. Her greatest disillusionment while working in the church office building had to do with the knowledge, acquired from her friends in the historian's office, that Mormon women in the nineteenth century had freely practiced the gifts of the spirit. They had spoken in tongues, held prayer circles, and healed the sick. What was especially disillusioning was the realization that knowledge of these gifts had been obliterated within a single generation of Mormon women. At issue was not only the practice of spiritual gifts by women but the knowledge that such a practice had once existed.

For Lavina, a campaign against knowledge is the most ominous and reprehensible of endeavors. For her, knowledge and truth are one and the same, and she cannot countenance a suppression of truth even when other spiritual values appear to be served by its suppression. Hence the final disillusionment of which Lavina spoke during our interview was inevitable, that being the 1991 announcement of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve against participation in symposia and other unauthorized gatherings where religious topics are discussed. It seemed to Lavina that the same suppression that had obliterated the knowledge of spiritual gifts among nineteenth-century Mormon women was now being directed against general historical research on Mormon topics and against an open, two-sided discussion of Mormon issues.

It was at this point that Lavina determined upon the course of action that would result, two years later, in her excommunication. She began recording attempts by the official church to suppress the enablement of women, historical research, and open discussion of Mormon issues, dating from the appointment of Leonard Arrington as church historian in 1972. This she assembled as a chronological listing of announcements and incidents with little narrative coherence between them. To this chronology she added opening and concluding statements reflecting her personal views. She read an early version of this essay at the main Sunstone symposium of 1992. As I have said, it was published in *Dialogue* during the spring of 1993, leading to her excommunication in September of that year.

In her opening statement Lavina characterizes the incidents of her chronology as a "clash between obedience to ecclesiastical authority and the integrity of individual conscience."[2] Some of her entries are therefore

2. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership: A Contemporary Chronology," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): 7.

declarations by general authorities against the perceived dangers of historians, intellectuals, and feminists. One such entry reads:

> *5 April 1991.* President Hinckley warns Regional Representatives "to be alert" to "small beginnings of apostasy" and cites prayers to Mother in Heaven as an example. Days earlier, a student had prayed to "Our Father and Mother in Heaven" at BYU commencement.[3]

Most of the entries recount disciplinary actions of one kind or another. Lavina grants that her recording of these incidents is "lopsided," having been told from the point of view of individuals in conflict with authority. Admitting these individuals could well be guilty of provocative actions, she still characterizes them as "victims of ecclesiastical harassment," and it is clear that she strongly favors the integrity of the individual conscience over obedience to authority. The following minor incident will serve as an example:

> *Fall 1979.* Paul and Margaret Toscano are asked to speak in sacrament meeting on reverence. Before the meeting begins, Bishop Sheldon Talbot tells them their former stake president, Curtis Van Alfen, telephoned Talbot and warned him they had "apostate" leanings. "If you say one word I disagree with," Talbot states, "I will close the meeting." Shaken, the Toscanos deliver their talks without incident.[4]

Lavina's liberal point of view becomes entirely apparent in her concluding statement, where she enumerates the response the Mormon intellectual community should make to the suppression of individual conscience. The following sentences, which serve as headings for seven items, summarize Lavina's call to action:

> First, we must speak up.
> Second, we must protest injustice.
> Third, we must defend one another.
> Fourth, we must protest, expose, and work against an internal espionage system that creates and maintains secret files on members of the church.
> Fifth, we must be more assertive in dealing with our leaders.
> Sixth, we need to support, encourage, and sustain ecclesiastical leaders who also value honesty, integrity, and nurturing.
> And seventh, we must seek humility as a prerequisite for a more loving, a less fearful, community.[5]

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3. Ibid., 35.
4. Ibid., 11-12.
5. Ibid., 61-63.

The brief announcement regarding the Mormon Alliance, co-signed by Lavina and Janice Allred, which appeared as a letter to the editor in the same issue of *Dialogue,* was even more provocative in its diction. "Spiritual abuse or injury," it said, "occurs in a religious system when individuals act without adequate accountability, using position, 'special' status, or presumed special understandings of the gospel in ways that violate the agency, injure the spiritual growth, coerce the compliance, damage the self-esteem, and/or demean the dignity of others, whether leaders or members."[6]

Rarely have more revolutionary documents been published among the Mormons. Certainly no one should be astonished that higher authority quickly instructed her stake president, Marlin S. Miller, to initiate disciplinary proceedings. These proceedings may be documented from Lavina's appeal of her excommunication to the First Presidency and from appendices to that appeal, which she has made available. Of special interest are Lavina's notes about her only face-to-face interview with President Miller, held on 2 May 1993, and the letters which she subsequently exchanged with him.

It is clear that Lavina and President Miller held irreconcilable premises. The letters of each show frustration and sorrow over not being understood by the other. A number of the letters show Lavina's attempt to articulate the issues in a manner satisfactory to both parties, which the following excerpt will illustrate:

> For me [writes Lavina], the important issue is that some members of the Church have experienced spiritual abuse at the hands of leaders who have exercised unrighteous dominion over them. They are hurt, often devastated. For you, the important issue is that bringing such cases into a public form "shames and defames" the Church, violates the confidentiality of Church leaders on the ward, stake, and general level, and infringes leaders' privacy.[7]

From the beginning, President Miller did not admit the possibility of abuse in the disciplinary system of the church. In response to her assertion that the system "left members no recourse if it wasn't working," President Miller "said flatly that he thought they did have recourse: they should go back to the bishop or the stake president [with whom they were having conflict]."[8]

It is noteworthy that, at the moment of the interview, the discipline

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6. Lavina Fielding Anderson and Janice Allred to the Editor, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26 (Spring 1993): ix.

7. Lavina Fielding Anderson to Marlin S. Miller, 6 May 1993.

8. Lavina Fielding Anderson, Notes on a meeting with the Wells Stake Presidency, 2 May 1993.

envisioned by the stake president, should Lavina continue to uphold her *Dialogue* article and maintain her activities with the Mormon Alliance, was the surrender of Lavina's temple recommend. The letters that follow the interview show Lavina not only upholding but elaborating upon the article. Very likely President Miller interpreted this as intransigence on Lavina's part and in time settled upon the more drastic eventuality of excommunication. A particular matter that undoubtedly influenced his decision was her refusal to surrender her recommend. In mid-July she objected to giving up her recommend on the ground that it would be an admission of unworthiness on her part. She offered instead what seemed a reasonable compromise, already in effect: "I voluntarily suspended my temple worship after our meeting on May 2. I did so because I respect the order of the Church that provides a system of shared responsibility for determining temple worthiness. I will continue to suspend my temple worship until a resolution of this matter is reached."[9]

President Miller was apparently less than happy with this compromise. In early August he wrote Lavina that he had given notice that her recommend was not to be honored at the temple. In the same letter he adopted a warning tone that undoubtedly let Lavina know it was only a matter of time before she would be excommunicated.[10] After deliberating for almost a month, Lavina responded: "I was shocked and affronted that you would consider my promise inadequate on a matter as sacred and serious as temple worship." Noting that President Miller has "persistently defined the issue as a 'local' matter of my obedience to your instructions," she asserts, "This is *not* a local matter."

Behind this defiance is her frustration over the refusal of Elder Loren C. Dunn, President Miller's area president, to meet with her. During their interview in May, President Miller admitted that his investigation had been instigated by Elder Dunn. Now, rebuffed again in her attempt to speak with Elder Dunn, Lavina insists, "The fact that the matter was originally called to your attention by a General Authority automatically means that it is not a local matter but a general matter." She goes on in this long, fervent letter to define spiritual abuse in yet greater detail. She ends her letter with a declaration that seems to accept the inevitability of her excommunication:

> You have control over some aspects of my life as a Mormon, President Miller. You have already deprived me of temple worship. You can restrict or eliminate callings for me. You can disfellowship or excommunicate me. But you do not have control over my spiritual life, my relationship with the Savior, or my identity as a Mormon. I will always be a Mormon, whether I am a member of the Church or not.[11]

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9. Lavina Fielding Anderson to Marlin S. Miller, 14 July 1993.
10. Marlin S. Miller to Lavina Fielding Anderson, 3 Aug. 1993.
11. Lavina Fielding Anderson to Marlin S. Miller, 2 Sept. 1993.

President Miller's next letter was a brief summons to a disciplinary hearing, which Lavina did not attend. Following that, dated the evening of the hearing, came his letter announcing her excommunication.

Lavina's thirty-seven-page appeal to the First Presidency is dated 23 October 1993. The appeal has three parts: an assertion of procedural irregularities, a clarification of spiritual abuse, and a declaration of Lavina's loyalty to Mormonism. The first section enumerates thirteen procedural irregularities. Of these, the ninth, "Involvement in the Process by General Authorities," receives the most detailed treatment. Extending her discussion to other disciplinary cases, Lavina establishes the probability that elders Boyd K. Packer and Loren C. Dunn have orchestrated a series of punitive actions by various stake presidents, including Lavina's. In conclusion, Lavina argues that this and the other irregularities have denied her a fair trial. A lack of a fair trial, she asserts, is itself evidence of the spiritual abuse she has accused the church disciplinary system of fostering.

She moves then to the second and, according to her own estimation, most important part of her appeal, a further clarification of spiritual abuse, which she also calls "unrighteous dominion" and "ecclesiastical abuse." Having defined seven traits which characterize spiritual abuse, she asserts her thesis with unflinching candor:

> I believe that the Church is not currently able to address the problems of ecclesiastical abuse for two reasons: (1) Very few, except those who have suffered ecclesiastical abuse or seen their loved ones endure its anguish and humiliations, are willing to believe that it can happen in the Lord's church. There is enormous denial of the problem and a defensiveness about protecting the leaders that prevents accurate analysis of the situation; and (2) The organizational structure of the priesthood pipeline works *against* correcting abuses and actually plays into the hands of abusive leaders.[12]

By December Lavina learned her appeal had been denied. I for one cannot believe she ever hoped that it might succeed. Long and articulate, it must stand as an elaboration of the article for which she had been excommunicated in the first place.

In concluding, I would like to emphasize two matters, Lavina's profound spirituality and her continuing involvement in her ward and stake.

I am impressed by the sincerity with which Lavina made up her mind to persist in her assertion of abuse within the church disciplinary system. In her article she writes: "I prayed, fasted, went to the temple, performed my callings with new exactness, and was newly attentive in

12. Lavina Fielding Anderson to Presidents Ezra Taft Benson, Gordon B. Hinckley, and Thomas S. Monson, 23 Oct. 1993, 27.

meetings. From the bottom of my heart, I wanted to avoid self-deception or intellectual pride."[13] In the long letter to President Miller where she seems to have resigned herself to the inevitability of her excommunication, she writes:

> I have a deep love for the Savior and a profound testimony of the power of his atonement. I know the power of prayer and priesthood blessings. I love the Book of Mormon and draw strength daily from reading the scriptures. I am thankful for my baptismal covenants, which I can renew weekly. I am thankful for the opportunity to have served a mission. My temple marriage is precious to me. . . . I have a profound love for the Prophet Joseph Smith and a firm testimony of his inspired calling. I sustain his successors as prophets, seers, and revelators.[14]

Those who know Lavina personally understand that the foregoing is not mere rhetoric. Few Latter-day Saints are more sincerely devout than Lavina Fielding Anderson.

That sincerity shows in the second matter I wish to emphasize, Lavina's continuing involvement in her ward and stake. In her appeal she declares her determination to remain active: "I know that there will be difficult moments, but I'm committed to being in church every Sunday and being as active as I'm permitted to be—this year, next year, forever."[15] In a later discussion of this decision, Lavina cites the example of Juanita Brooks, who, though never excommunicated, was reprimanded by general authorities and ostracized by her local ward for having published a history of the Mountain Meadows Massacre. "If Juanita Brooks . . . could do it, so could I," Lavina writes. Then she recounts her reception by her ward:

> The first Sunday after my excommunication, I sat on the second row from the back in Relief Society, listening to someone else play the piano. When the lesson was over, a half-dozen older women crowded around me to hug me. "We love you," one them murmured. "Keep coming," said another. "Did you see how many were in opening exercises at Sunday School?" asked a third. "I think it's because of you. You're making people search their souls. I know I'm searching mine."
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> The bishop was standing at the door to the chapel. He took my hand and pulled me into a hug, smiling warmly. Paul was on the stand that day, leading the choir. Christian was sitting with the deacons until after the sacrament was passed. I would have to walk alone to the third row back, north side,

13. Anderson, "The LDS Intellectual Community and Church Leadership," 8.
14. Anderson to Miller, 2 Sept. 1993.
15. Anderson to Benson, Hinckley, and Monson, 34.

and sit there alone, at least until after the sacrament was over and the choir had sung. It was a very long walk, but it wasn't a hard one. People kept stopping me, hugging me. When I sat down, it took a minute to realize what I was feeling. Pride. I was so *proud* of my ward. They were behaving exactly as you'd hope a Christian community would behave.

We can do it, I thought. *How long was it for you, Juanita? Thirty years? We can do it.*[16]

Lavina is convinced she will be reinstated within her lifetime. She believes she has had a spiritual witness to this eventuality. While waiting, Lavina wishes to make her simple presence a compelling statement. In a recent speech, Lavina characterizes the eloquent testimony of those who protest, not by words, but by their loving presence. This is the testimony that she, now silenced, plans to bear among her fellow Latter-day Saints: "I want that testimony to say, 'I'm here. I've been excluded from fellowship for speaking the truth and following my conscience, but I'm still here. Don't be afraid. We don't have to hide our history, silence our scholars, abuse our members, and marginalize our women.'"[17]

I also believe that Lavina will be reinstated. I do not know if it will be in her lifetime. Sometime in the next century, I believe the church will have admitted that it must enlarge the role of women in its rituals and administration. I believe it will have discovered it can weather adverse historical fact without needing to suppress it. I believe it will have granted that its disciplinary system has indeed benefitted from more checks and balances and from a clearer application of due process.

In my judgment Lavina will exert a far stronger influence on this process of desirable change than if she had not been excommunicated. Some have wondered if we should compare Lavina with Joan of Arc. Obviously we are not to make too much of this comparison. For one thing, it is far too early to beatify Lavina. Lavina herself has warned us against making her out to be a saint of the traditional Christian sort. She asks simply that her case and the cases of other Mormon intellectuals excommunicated near the same time be considered with candor: "people should say what they honestly see in the case, in me, in any of us, the disciplined. I have confidence that hagiography and vilification will both produce counterreactions that will be closer to the truth, and I trust the process of that give and take."[18]

Yet those who have excommunicated Lavina may have well created a

16. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "Sacrament Meeting, Whittier Ward," 18 Feb. 1995, unpublished manuscript.

17. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "A Testimony of Presence," speech delivered at Pilgrimage conference, 13 May 1994, 5.

18. Anderson to Peterson.

martyr. I have been surprised by how many rank-and-file members of the church know of Lavina's case and regard her punishment as unnecessarily severe. Certainly those who wish to propose constructive change within the church will find Lavina a compelling model for their own behavior. By refusing to be angry, by refusing to withdraw from the society of her ward and stake, by continuing to provide as much loving service as the authorities will allow, Lavina has largely disarmed the terrors of excommunication.

During the next decade I expect to see the emergence of an informal church in exile. It will be informal because it will be without head or organization. It will be spread among hundreds of wards. It will be composed of faithful excommunicants, who, like Lavina, persist in participating as fully as possible in the life of their ward and stake. At the same time, on the battle fronts of liberal Mormonism, in gatherings, symposiums, and journals, they will persist in pressing for the constructive reform for which they have been excommunicated.

The genius and blessing of Lavina Fielding Anderson is that she offers an example to follow. She teaches a pattern of passive resistance that will work. She demonstrates that excommunication is not, after all, an effective weapon against a sincere and prayerful conscience.