

Busing to Kolob

Leaving the Fold: Candid Conversations with Inactive Mormons, by James W. Ure (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 253 pp., \$19.95

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YEARS AGO, I visit-taught a single mother of three young boys whose grasp of Mormon doctrine seemed patchy, at best. Our so-called “lessons”—punctuated by frequent smoking breaks—were seldom more than lively recitations regarding her latest live-in partner. Why, I wondered, did she keep plugging away at a religion so at odds with her lifestyle? The answer, when it finally came, was less complicated than I had anticipated: she wanted her kids to attend church, and the Mormon chapel was only a half block north of the bus line.

For her, the choice was obvious. She owned no vehicle. How else was the family going to get to church? Raised with the notion that truth is the be-all and end-all of any religion, this was my first exposure to other reasons for choosing—or not choosing—the Mormon church.

The series of 18 interviews with inactive Mormons in James W. Ure’s book, *Leaving the Fold*, forces us to examine our preconceptions about inactivity, to grapple with what it means to be Mormon, and to identify our own relationship to the community.

Ure is an author and journalist who lives and works in Utah Valley

where 69 percent of all residents are LDS. According to pollster Dan Jones, 45 percent of the total number of church members in Utah are, by their own accounting, “somewhat active” or “inactive” (xii). Extrapolating from these percentages, there may be as many as 2.5 million inactive Mormons worldwide (xiii). Conventional wisdom has it that the reason for inactivity is very simple: “Mormonism is not an easy religion. Those who can’t live it, leave.” However, as these interviews demonstrate, the motives behind disengagement are as multi-layered as the personalities themselves.

In the fall of 1996, Ure began with a list of about 75 possible interview subjects, primarily from the Salt Lake valley area. He targeted individuals who were, by his definition, “Jack Mormons”—i.e., formerly active long-term members still on the records of the church who no longer attend regularly nor pay tithing. Roughly six months, 42 interviews, and 800 pages later, he had pared down his selection to the narratives of six women and twelve men for this volume.

As anyone who has ever attempted a formal interview knows, an interview is really a dialogue in disguise—influenced as much by the perspectives and skill of the interviewer as by the insights and storytelling abilities of the respondent. Some interviewees seize up at the sight of a tape-recorder or at the prospect of being publicly identified, as is clearly the case with one—maybe two—of the three anonymous interviews in this compilation (see *Business Woman*, 57; *Civic Worker*, 183). However, the remaining interviews are refreshingly candid, as the subtitle promises.

If I were to make any stylistic changes, it would be to encourage greater uniformity of questions across interviews (facilitating qualitative research comparisons) in addition to substituting more open-ended prompts. For example, "Tell me more about that," is a better follow-up than a leading yes/no question such as, "The demands of the church—did they seem rigid to you?" (107). I would also jettison the dedicatory epigraphs heading each chapter; without benefit of the prefatory explanation, they bear no obvious relation to the text.

Like so many of us steeped in Mormonism, Ure appears to have been motivated by guilt. He started this project as a way of working out his feelings regarding his own "less active" status. It is no surprise then that he interviewed his mother, Helen Bowring Ure. In her chapter, as well as in the interview with William Mulder, the author foregrounds his own agenda—"I'm being interviewed by you now. But I'm responding and thinking of my own experience" (36)—suggesting that these two interviews may have been among the earliest in this collection.

An informal poll of male and female readers in the mission field—okay, the four people I knew who, at the time of this review, had finished the book—indicated an overwhelming preference for the Ed Firmage chapter, followed closely by those of Shauna Adix and Ardean Watts. Why did these particular interviewees stand out? "Because," as one reader pointed out, "you can tell that they really had to struggle with their beliefs and they were able to articulate that. Some of those other people, well, you wonder if they ever had testimonies in the first place."

It is true that for many of the respondents, Mormonism appears to have been, from childhood, mostly a

way of life—an historical, social, cultural, or tribal/ethnic affiliation. For example, Beth Condie explains that although she was "all those things you are supposed to be when you are raised a Mormon woman. . . basically, I never had a testimony of the church" (122). Scott Burton echoes the comments of others when he says that "the historical and social aspects of Mormonism were interesting and comforting, but as a doctrine, as a belief system, I just never could buy it" (85). For these folks, living the LDS lifestyle was not the core issue.

Even among those who were raised as believers, eventually there came a time when, as Adix says, "It just stopped working for me" (176; see also Murphy, 23, and Watts, 207). Despite being unable to accommodate the orthodoxy, many respondents would identify with Stewart Udall when he describes himself as "my own unique kind of Mormon" (74). Firmage characterizes himself as a member of the Mormon church, as well as a member of the Mormon ethnic group or tribe. But, he continues, "My religious practice is Episcopal, my theology is catholic—small "c"—and my spirituality is a blend of Catholic, Episcopal, Buddhist, and Hindu spirituality, with one huge center—Jesus as Christ" (232–33).

Levi Peterson, who also claims a kind of "tribal" Mormonism, points out the irony of excommunicating true believers such as Lavina Fielding Anderson when Jack Mormons like himself make up a large percentage of the official membership (52). Which brings us back to the questions, "What is a Latter-day Saint anyway?" and "Who gets to decide which of us belong in the fold?" There are those, I'm sure, who would insist that living on the bus line isn't enough.