

How My Mission Saved My Membership

Tania Rands Lyon

IN 1991 I ALMOST JOINED THE PEACE CORPS. I graduated from college that year with the coveted Peace Corps job offer just as I had hoped for years. The glitch in my plan, however, was that at the same time I was blindsided by a dramatic re-conversion to Mormonism. It was an unexpected turn after having majored in a very leftist field (Peace and Conflict Studies) at an arguably leftist school (U.C. Berkeley), in which I was exposed to some very compelling criticisms of hierarchical and patriarchal systems. But I had Mormon roots, and they can run surprisingly deep.

I grew up in a liberal and devout Mormon family, but drifted away from the church during college for a host of reasons. After four years of sporadic activity, I was drawn back when I met the most Christ-like, thoughtful, and authentic Mormon I had ever known. I hadn't realized Mormons came in such a variety and had assumed that the smarter people were the farther they ran from organized religion—especially a rigidly hierarchical, sexist religion with a bent for literalism in scriptural exegesis. Over the next several months, my fascination with this fellow student led me, often reluctantly, to an inexorable re-examination of my own spirituality and my love-hate relationship with the church. I had several powerful spiritual manifestations along the way although I still struggled terribly to have faith. Faith is not one of my spiritual gifts. I gritted my teeth and *strained* to have faith.

By the summer, I was recommitted to life in the church and feeling like a fresh convert—profoundly humble and very spiritually shy. At that point, the idea of serving a mission began cropping up everywhere. Two people in my life wrote suddenly and separately to offer financial assistance should I choose to serve. Every church talk and lesson seemed to be about missionary work. I couldn't get the idea out of my head. It seemed I had a choice between two good causes: serving the world as a Peace Corps volunteer or serving the world as a Mormon missionary. I

couldn't lose, I reasoned, but I hoped that God might offer an opinion on the matter. Many weeks of prayer and fasting and one glorious connection-to-the-divine later, I made my choice and filed my mission papers. The hardest part was telling my professors that their letters of recommendation for the Peace Corps job had been for naught—I had not only found religion, I was prepared to fanatically foist it on others. The best part was receiving my mission call and learning that the beneficiaries of my fanaticism would be the people of Ukraine. I had minored in Russian for fun in college and was thrilled for a chance to use the language in earnest and in a country freshly opened to Mormon missionaries—a new religious frontier.

Perhaps the most important attribute to characterize my life when I entered the Missionary Training Center was humility. This was remarkable since I come by humility about as easily as I come by faith. But facing down my personal and intellectual pride was a central element in my conversion process, and I read Ezra Taft Benson's conference talk on pride over and over again. I had never been so open, trusting, and teachable. I remember the night I found out that women did not hold standard leadership positions on missions. I should have known better, but I was nonetheless shocked. I swallowed this bitter pill and moved on. Humility is not a list-topper in the pantheon of feminist virtues, and I struggled with the implications of humbly accepting my inequitable circumstances. But I had also just become re-acquainted with a profoundly intimate God who seemed to approve the choices I was making. Humility had opened some mind-blowing doors for me, so I was willing to stick with it for a while.

In the MTC I also began reading scripture more intensively than ever before in my life. I blazed through the Book of Mormon and much of the Doctrine and Covenants and came away frequently moved and inspired but also astonished and deeply hurt at the gaping lack of women characters and women's voices. The Book of Mormon was worse than the Bible! And the D&C was so exclusively male-oriented I wondered seriously where women belonged in this newly restored church and why a God of justice would allow their blatant exclusion. At the same time I was freshly endowed and attending the temple on a weekly basis. The temple was an intensely conflicted experience for me. I never once came out of a session without a sense of peace and eternal perspective, nor did I ever emerge without having earnestly struggled with the role of women as I saw it portrayed in the temple endowment.

Things came to a head one night, and I took my issues to God. In pain and confusion, I wondered how the God who seemed to know and love me so intimately could endorse or even allow the divisive hierarchical patterns I saw so clearly in scripture and the temple. I poured out all my frustration in an emotional wave until I realized that I was prepared

to truly trust God—for the first time I felt I was willing to accept things as they stood. I wasn't demanding change; I just wanted to understand why. If only I could understand a little of the why, then the place of women in the church would be easier to live with. Exhausted, I cried myself to sleep, stuffing my head in a pillow so as not to wake my companion across the room.

Beginning the very next day and lasting a whole week, I received some of the clearest answers I had ever had in response to prayer. They came as I read a Joseph Smith Translation passage of the Bible, in a conversation with my companion, and while lost in thought. They spoke to me in deeply personal ways that are hard to describe, but the essence of each answer I recorded in my journal:

(1) The scriptures and church teachings are incomplete; you do not have sufficient information or knowledge at this time to understand God's mind in this matter: have patience.

(2) Learn first to cultivate the humility and meekness of Christ before you worry about who seems to have more recognition and importance than you.

(3) To desire the priesthood for its status or power is to profoundly misunderstand the priesthood.

It was enough. The fact that God saw fit to answer that prayer in any way at all was even more comforting than the answers themselves. Again, I moved on. I met my mission president, Howard Biddulph, in Vienna and the next day landed in Kiev in a January snowstorm, four months after Ukraine had declared its independence from the USSR. Out of 33 missionaries in Ukraine upon my arrival, six of us were women.

I attribute the positive experience of my mission to several factors, including the unique time and place of my mission and a mission president who respected and trusted me. The mission was brand new—there were no mission traditions, no established protocols. The speed at which the mission was expanding also meant that we only had a few months before most of us would be senior companions or even training "greenie" missionaries fresh from the MTC. We were constantly being pushed and stretched to new limits: a formula for an intense reliance on divine assistance and on each other. Moreover, there was no church structure—for a while, *we* were the church structure. This gave both elders and sisters more responsibility and therefore more decision-making power. We had to work together constantly to solve the endless challenges and problems that arise in building a lay religious community from scratch. There was so much work to do, we had less time to worry about who should be doing what or how we should be acting along gender lines. However, those lines of demarcation were certainly there, often bobbing to the surface of my consciousness.

One elder in my mission, a recent convert and slightly older than the rest, had a learning disability and struggled with the Russian language. I had tutored him in the MTC, and so the day he was to perform his first baptism, he came to me for help in memorizing the baptismal prayer. We rehearsed and rehearsed until he had it right—or at least good enough—and I watched with pride as he performed the ordinance. A few weeks later he approached me at another baptismal service and said: “I was just going to ask if you were baptizing anyone when I realized for the first time that sisters can’t baptize! You can never know what it feels like to stand in the water and raise your arm and say that prayer!” He looked at me maybe with pity and maybe with admiration that I could endure such an injustice. I was touched that he had noticed. It really wasn’t that hard—mostly we just took this arrangement for granted like so many other things. And surely the work wasn’t about the one who stood in for Christ—it was about the people who were accepting Christ. I truly believed that and trusted in it. But for a priesthood holder to notice and to guilelessly ask how it made me feel was deeply gratifying.

A few months after that, my companion and I taught a mother, Milada, and her two daughters, ages seven and eight. Milada had had a dream prompting her to come to our church, and so we met her and her daughters in the brand new branch we were busy nurturing with four elders. That Sunday I taught primary as usual. Leila, the vibrant eight-year-old daughter, promptly adopted me and followed me everywhere clinging to my hand. We taught the family a few discussions during that week, and they came again to church the following Sunday. We lived very close to them, and so we rode home together and got off at the same bus stop. As we walked, I turned to Milada and asked her how she’d liked the services that day. She smiled, looked at the ground and said, “All right. I’m ready to be baptized. You just tell me the day, and I will get baptized then.” Happily surprised, I grinned back. “How about next Sunday?” Milada agreed and looked over to Leila still clinging to my hand. “What do you think? Shall we get baptized next week together?” Leila jumped in excitement, grabbed my arm with her other hand, looked up at me through her gorgeous thick black eyelashes and exclaimed, “I want *you* to baptize me!”

I laughed a little and explained what the priesthood was and why an elder would have to baptize her. “Do you remember Elder Stencil whom you met in primary? He could baptize you.” Leila accepted this in stride. Not long afterward I had a dream. I dreamt that a little girl whom I loved and had taught was getting baptized and everyone was gathered at our usual spot on the banks of the Dniepr River. Three of us wore white—an elder, the girl and I, and we all walked out into the water together. I stood on one side of her with a hand on her back for reassurance as the elder on the other side raised his arm, pronounced the words of the ordi-

nance and then together we lowered her into the water. The dream was tinged with joy and bathed in peace and felt like the most natural thing in the world. I remembered it with wonder. After recording the dream in my journal, I wrote: "I do not feel bitter or persecuted because I can't baptize. In fact that seems trivial next to the power and authority I have often felt in my calling as missionary. It's just something I've wondered about. . . ." Why not have a world where priesthood authority isn't shielded by sharp divisions, where men and women could stand together in blessing circles and in baptismal waters for those whom they love even if only one man can act as voice? There was so much gentleness and love in my dream.

Six months into my mission, we had a sisters' conference in the mission home led by our mission president's wife, Colleen Biddulph (by then there were eleven of us as well as three older sisters serving with their husbands). We had lunch followed by a program with games and gospel messages packaged in cute stories. Then we began the all-female testimony meeting. Near the end our mission president quietly joined us from the kitchen, where he had been single-handedly washing our lunch dishes, and testified that he had seen light pouring from the room and felt that angels were in attendance. I did not doubt him. I remember power filling the room and feeling physically drained and exhausted at the end, but more spiritually nourished than at almost any other time of my life. It was the experience that sustained me through a difficult transfer away from the branch I loved and had nurtured from its birth out to Donetsk, the second city in Ukraine to be opened to missionary work.

My companion, Robin Holt, and I arrived as the first sisters in Donetsk. We were told that we had been anxiously requested by the elders, who had opened the city four months earlier, and who were ready to organize Relief Society and Primary. Our arrival had been well advertised and we were literally welcomed as queens by the handful of new members there, complete with hand-kissing and gushing, flowery, Soviet-style oratories about the essential nature of womanhood. We rolled up our sleeves and went to work, but that first assignment didn't last long. Soon I was transferred again to the eastern edges of the city to work with another fledgling two-month-old branch, and the great "Golden Era" of my mission began.

The newly formed East Branch at that point had nine baptized members and an average sacrament meeting attendance of 90-100. For the next two months, our missionary district consisted of only two companionships: one set of sisters and one set of elders. The senior elder was Travis Genta, who had left the MTC at the same time as I had, eight months earlier. This meant we had equal seniority as missionaries although I was older, better educated, and had more language and leadership experience than he did. At that transfer, he was made simultane-

ously and for the first time a trainer, a District Leader, and Branch President. I, too, was training a new companion again. Both of our companions were fresh from the MTC, lacking previous Russian language experience, and therefore, severely limited in the kinds of responsibilities they could take on. Elder Genta was understandably overwhelmed. But he was also astonishingly pure-hearted, humble, and quick to earn the trust of those around him. The partnership we forged over the next seven months is one of the great treasures in my life.

For weeks we would alternate giving talks in Sacrament Meeting. One of us would then teach the investigator Sunday School class while the other would teach the member class, then I would teach Relief Society, and he would teach Priesthood. The end of church would be swirling chaos as we tried to talk with all the visitors and cram teaching visits with them into our already crowded weekly planners. Then we would pile onto a tram to head for the weekly citywide baptismal services. It was an exhausting but heady time. Elder Genta and I developed a deep respect for each other. I came to him with many of my problems and questions, and he came to me with many of his. We worked out issues in the branch together on the phone almost every night. I started calling on him to administer blessings for investigators and members. The first few times he was nervous and the language came haltingly. But as months went by, he grew more and more confident and calm and (it seemed to me) inspired. One night Elder Genta and I worked together through prayer and priesthood to cast an evil spirit out of an investigator's apartment. Afterwards, my companion and I walked home talking about how satisfying it was to watch young elders grow into the power of their priesthood.

The hierarchical divisions of priesthood authority I usually felt melted away into irrelevance. Elder Genta was my priesthood leader—and there was value in having an established organization for handling many issues—but the priesthood itself became a tool we both used for a common goal: building up the Kingdom of God. I felt that we were equals yoked together in the work and pulling with all our might. Who *held* the priesthood didn't seem nearly as important as who *used* it. Our mix of mutual goals, mutual respect, and a healthy dose of humility suddenly gave patriarchy a very light touch indeed. What we achieved seemed marvelous: we brought an introduction to God to people with no history of religious freedom, and we built a sturdy community organization where there was no tradition of civil society. I found I had tapped into a love far beyond my personal capacity. For a time I would come to my knees at the end of the day and find I had no words to say because it seemed I had been in a constant conversation with God all day long, channels wide open to the Spirit. Member after member bore testimony about the role I had played in the miracle of their conversion. By the time I went home and Elder Genta was sent on to open a new city, many

members called us the mother and father of the branch and the praise and love that engulfed us was dizzying. I had certainly never felt so adored or immortalized. My spiritual side squirmed in this spotlight and fought to stay humble—to see myself only as a tool in God’s hands. My political side was very much aware that no other setting, including those which explicitly embraced feminism, had ever granted me access to such power and influence.

Near the end of my mission, my mission president surprised me in an interview, saying that had I been male, he would have called me to be assistant to the president, the highest level of leadership for missionaries in the field. I knew he meant it as a profound compliment, and I felt grateful, but I had no idea what to say in reply. I spent days wondering if it made me feel proud or deeply sad. I couldn’t tell. In the end it didn’t seem to matter. I had poured my heart into a bottomless work and had found myself enlarged beyond my imagination.

It is harder for me to remember all this now as a sociologist of gender and a professional Mormon mother whose energies are torn in a dozen different directions. I respect the church and have seen the good its structure has wrought around the world. Its tribal community, cutting across so many social strata, has fed me and stretched me in a hundred different ways. I have served in satisfying callings of teaching and leadership. My greatest joys have been filtered through this organization, and I love the intellectual depth and bizarre idiosyncrasies of Mormon doctrine.

So why does being Mormon also hurt so much? Why do the structural inequalities between men and women grate on me as I support my husband in the bishopric and raise my daughter in the church? Why do I struggle every week with how much to accept and how much to try to change? My mission taught me that humility is key to my own happiness and to a painless patriarchy. I know from my own failures that humility is too often in short supply. The sticking point is that in a system that limits authority to men, a man lacking humility has more potential to damage others than a prideful woman with less decision-making power. Since Elder Genta and my mission president, I have encountered many more Christ-like priesthood leaders heroically softening the edges of patriarchy, but I have also seen countless moments when system-level inequality has damaged us as gendered beings. The tension in these contradictions is exhausting to live with.

Yet every time I wonder if Mormonism is selling us short as men and women, my mission experience comes back to stare me in the face. I cannot escape the fact that this patriarchal institution was the framework for the most empowering time of my life—when I channeled more influence over more lives than in any other time and place. And so I stay. I’ve seen what the church can be and what I can be within the church.