

An Open Letter to the *Dialogue* Board

Nathan Oman

Editor's note: This letter was first published as the lead article on the Times & Seasons blog site, where it generated more than 130 comments. Dialogue's readers are invited to view that thread in the archives of Times & Seasons at <http://www.timesandseasons.org/>. The letter is republished here with the permission of its author.

I hope that you will not find an unsolicited letter presumptuous, but I wanted to give you my thoughts on what I see as *Dialogue's* problems and some things it could do to improve. First, let me say I wish *Dialogue* well, and I want it to succeed. I am very heartened to see the appearance of important works on Mormonism in places like Oxford University Press or the *Harvard Theological Review*. However, while there may some day come a time when the publishing of Mormon studies can occur entirely outside the ghetto of wholly Mormon venues, that time has not yet come. Furthermore, for certain topics I don't think that it will ever come. That being the case, I care a great deal about the health and public reputation of Mormon intellectual fora.

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I think that *Dialogue* has some serious problems. My thoughts on this are based on many hours of conversation about Mormon intellectual life with LDS grad students and other young people who care about such things. I hope that you are under no illusions: There are any number of talented young intellectuals who will be the leading Mormon scholars of this generation who are unwilling to publish in *Dialogue* because of the perception that it is the in-house journal of the disaffected Mormon community, and they have no desire to be associated with it. I think that this is unfortunate. However, it is a reality, and I understand the concerns of young Mormon scholars who shy away from *Dialogue*. Frankly, I share some of them. The problem is that for younger scholars in particular, the professional rewards of publishing in Mormon studies are virtually nil, and the belief that publishing in *Dialogue* will create a negative perception among the broader Mormon community leads them to think that it simply is not worth it. (*Dialogue* publications—as is true for all publications in explicitly Mormon fora—have very little professional value to tenure committees.) I realize that this perception of *Dialogue* is not entirely fair. You publish a lot of stuff that has little or no discernible ideological content, and pieces that are thought unduly critical of the Church or of Mormon belief no doubt get a disproportionate share of attention. Nevertheless, *Dialogue* has an image problem that is a substantial barrier to participation by many younger Mormon intellectuals. I doubt that any of this is news to you.

It is too easy, I think, for *Dialogue* to write off its image problems as evidence of Mormon anti-intellectualism and wash its hands of the issue. First, the concerns that I have heard about *Dialogue* are coming from those who are intensely interested in Mormonism, consider themselves intellectuals, and frankly have the scholarly credentials to back up the claim. However, they also consider themselves loyal and faithful Latter-day Saints. In other words, these are the concerns expressed by the people who should be your core author pool and audience. My impression is that you are losing them. Second, such a response is a recipe for increased marginalization and ultimately for institutional suicide. It transforms the perception into a self-fulfilling prophecy and would guarantee that ultimately *Dialogue* will, in actual fact, simply become the in-house journal for disaffected Mormondom. When this happens, *Dialogue* will have completely failed in its original mission. Third, washing your hands of the issue is too

easy. I believe that there are things that *Dialogue* can do to improve its situation. What is needed is not self-pity but a solution.

I think that the best way of mitigating these problems would be for *Dialogue* to solicit articles aggressively from well-known, established, conservative scholars arguing for overtly conservative positions. For example, you could ask Lynn D. Wardle to write an extended article on why same-sex marriage is a bad idea from both a policy perspective and from the perspective of LDS theology. Another possibility is to ask Daniel Peterson to write an article on why viewing the Book of Mormon as inspired fiction would be spiritual suicide for the Church. Perhaps you could get Louis Midgley to write a defense of excommunicating Mormon intellectuals who attack the Brethren. In other words, publish articles that are going to make aging, liberal, cultural Mormons who have been loyal *Dialogue* subscribers since the 1960s absolutely furious. You need to be thinking in each and every issue whether or not you have published something offensive to this group. *Dialogue* has shown a willingness to offend conservative or orthodox Mormons. I would work explicitly to make it a two-way street. Obviously, no one expects *Dialogue*'s board to agree with everything that the journal publishes, but consistently publishing one article in every issue for several years that took a recognizably conservative position on a theological or political issue would do much to signal that *Dialogue* was serious about . . . dialogue. However, doing this will require that you aggressively solicit pieces from those who have otherwise written *Dialogue* off as a lost cause. I assume that you are not publishing these articles because the manuscripts are not coming in. If they are coming in and you are refusing to publish them on ideological grounds, then *Dialogue* is a lost cause. I hope and believe that this is not the case.

Ultimately, I don't know if the suggestions here can help *Dialogue*. I am a sometime subscriber and consistent reader of the journal. I think that I have at least thumbed through every single issue of *Dialogue* ever published. I wish you well, and I think that it is very important that Mormonism have a place for scholarly discussion. I hope that *Dialogue* can make the changes necessary for it to become a vibrant part of that discussion. Without changes, however, I think that its future is bleak.