

LETTERS

Crosses to Bear

When I come home to my parents' house in Utah each year, I inevitably find myself thumbing through a recent issue of *Dialogue*, a last bastion of Mormonism for me as a gay Mormon before leaving the state, the country, and then the Church, a decade and a half ago.

It's always a pleasure to find one or two familiar voices of compassion still carrying the *Dialogue* torch, most recently, Robert Rees and his essay on "The Goodness of the Church" (41, no. 2 [Summer 2008]: 162-73). Rees writes that churches "create a home for us, let us in. When they fail to let all of us in (including the homely, the heretics, and the homosexuals), they fail in their fundamental purpose" (171).

My niece will be married in the Provo Temple later this week; and, again, I will be on the outside, not only for the ceremony but for a part of her that doesn't quite know how to include me in her life. In Utah Valley, having a gay uncle, no matter how distant, becomes her cross to bear.

I hear from my parents about the official Mormon campaign against gay marriage in California and feel confused. When the gay community moves in the moral directions

you would think the Church would encourage (that is, committed relationships manifested in marriage), the Church raises the rhetoric against us to new heights. They not only say they want us on the outside, but by denying us marriage, they seem to want us to slide deeper in non-Church directions.

Some might see as a threat the dawning realization that gay people are no less morally responsible in their choices than they themselves are. But after two decades on the outside, I still have hope that my Mormon community will take this opportunity to reach across the barrier that the Church is building and demolish it with an embrace of welcome.

No matter how we currently draw our lines in the sand, we are all in this together and for the duration. As Rees points out: "The Church is us; it is no better or no worse than we are (and that includes "you" and me), for the Church is what we make it" (171).

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More Upside

I enjoyed the article, "The Goodness of the Church" by Robert Rees (*Dialogue*, 41, no. 2 [Summer 2008]:

162–73). This has been a hot topic around our household the last couple of years. In 2005 my wife felt that she was spiritually starving to death in the LDS Church and began attending a fundamentalist evangelical church. Although not very happy at our ward, our teenage children did not follow her. She has not taken her name off the records and still attends sacrament meeting for the sake of family unity, but she is connected to this other community of faith now.

I do not wish to compare and comment on each and every point in the article by Brother Rees from an LDS versus an evangelical perspective. Obviously, many of the points of LDS goodness in the early part of Rees's list are considered revolting non-biblical heresies by evangelicals (Mother in Heaven, eternal marriage, man becoming a god, etc.) However, I find that we share almost every point in the second portion of the article by Brother Rees with evangelicals.

Our family came up with a few more points of strength and goodness of the LDS faith that we feel are as important and that other faiths, including evangelicals, do not come as close to exemplifying:

1. Pioneer heritage. This heritage belongs to all of us, including Brother Rees, a first-generation Saint and hence a modern pioneer. One of the most fascinating chapters in American history is the story of the Mormons. We have the heroism of the handcart companies, the

cooperation to tame the desert, and the building of hundreds of rugged communities. And we have the colorful events of plural marriage, murder and massacre, and our gunfighters and muleskinners.

2. Genealogy. Family history goes far beyond what is for many, both in and outside the Church, a hobby, beyond the enormous Ancestral File now on the internet, and even beyond esoteric theology that fuels temple ceremonies. LDS people have a clear sense of identity and feel a strong connectedness to their extended family and to history because of this concern with genealogy. I believe it forms part of the mentality of the ward-as-almost-like-family, a blessing that exists for many.

As an aside, I became aware of an unusual cardiac disease called LQTS. It is inherited, causes sudden death, and is treatable. One extended family I know of turned out to have a handful of living members with this condition, and it solved a couple of unexplained early deaths in previous generations. Very satisfying to know. Upon further inquiry into LQTS, I discovered that a Danish kindred originating in pioneer Utah has more than 150 living members with this condition and several other not-much-smaller families are also described among the Mormons. What a contrast in how many more relatives could be found and treated for this inherited condition because of the work

of both physicians and genealogists in the LDS family.

Extensive LDS genealogical records and a moderate degree of social isolation for part of a century, coupled with modern molecular biology, may prove to be the Rosetta stone for making medical advances in the fight against atherosclerosis, cancer, dementia, and other conditions. I will go out on a limb and predict that submitting your four-generation sheet might turn out to have more benefit to the health of future generations than keeping the Word of Wisdom.

3. The Church Educational System. Where the LDS people are numerous, high school and college students can take elective religious classes. This wonderful opportunity is often matched by many religions, especially in private schools run by churches. Where LDS people are less numerous, the ingenious early morning seminary program shines forth as truly inspirational. The key is to find a dedicated and compassionate teacher, without which the program is a nightmare.

My teenagers get up at 5:45 A.M. It is a great time to practice driving safely before the streets get dangerously congested, so they are better drivers than their friends. The kids go through the scriptures thoroughly, hopefully gaining some sort of a religious conviction, and they form bonds of strong friendship. (My kids' teacher also feeds them and sometimes they sleep). Most of these LDS teens have an ex-

tensive network of non-LDS friends so that shy or new LDS seminary-goers get plugged in with far more decent friends than they might have otherwise. Because of differences in start times for their various regular schools and commute times, many students have half an hour or more after seminary to finish up their homework and make final plans for the school day.

Because they are organized and motivated, they take harder classes and get involved in many other activities which means they are often up past midnight doing homework. Young people can survive on only four or five hours of sleep daily for several days. But by Friday and Saturday night, the early morning seminary students at my house are too tired to stay up and go to parties. They are home without protest and sound asleep in their own beds, when their peers are out getting drunk, high, laid, robbed, murdered, or killed in car wrecks.

4. Nannies. LDS girls make the best nannies. Whether this claim is empirically demonstrable or not, the demand for Mormon nannies is high. People who are too busy or too lazy to raise their own children and can afford to pay others to do it believe this claim. I recommend that any LDS girl who is thinking that she doesn't want to further her education beyond high school and who just wants to get married should consider becoming a nanny for a season. She can gain experience and see what it is actually like

to fight the “mommy wars” before she gets irrevocably committed. Furthermore, the experience will expand her horizon in other ways. Even in the less obvious babysitting industry, LDS girls are in high demand.

5. Active men. Most religions have a real problem getting adult men to attend church. Usually there is a 2:1 or 3:1 or higher ratio of female to male worshippers. Most LDS congregations are much closer to parity. I think it is the LDS lay priesthood that keeps more of our men active in the church. The downside of this situation is the stereotypical Mormon bishop with six wild kids who has little time to spend with them and also the way some women feel mistreated. In addition, Mormon men are more likely to be doing things with their children and spend less time on their own hobbies, in my observation.

6. Racism. We have an ugly history of racism, the memory of which continues to hamper missionary work. But I have observed that today our ward is more racially integrated than any other local church of which I’m aware. I believe that black people would generally feel more comfortable and accepted in our wards than in any other historically all-white church, by a long shot.

In the Deep South and across much of America, most churches are still highly segregated along racial lines. U.S. President Barack Obama attended a racially segre-

gated church and his former reverend would have never been able to get away with his radical theology if there had been more white faces in his congregation—especially if they were on the church board of directors.

Our ward is approximately 15 percent black. We have had black members in the bishopric and at other levels of ward leadership. Our current stake president is black (but he is so much more than that). At least two of the wards in this stake are about 50 percent black, judging by the percentage of their youth who attend activities. (I don’t have access to accurate statistics.) We also have a few Latino families in our ward, a few handfuls of people from just about anywhere, and a Spanish branch in the stake. No other church in our city comes close to this level of racial integration. The only exceptions are a few churches that have specific ministries for biracial couples, and the fact that such a ministry exists proves my point.

I realize that this integration is not ubiquitous and that our city is ringed by large and growing suburban wards that are as lily white as they are anywhere else. I don’t know if our level of integration holds in other large cities in the Eastern United States or out west. I suspect that it does to various degrees.

7. Finances. The LDS Church is wealthy. More than once, the LDS Church has been in severe financial

difficulty, like most churches. The source of the current wealth was explained to me by a non-LDS financial wizard at a Girl Scout campout during a weekend of steady torrential rain so severe that he could not get his gas stove lit, and I traded him bowls of warm chili for steak while he talked. He had made a careful study of the LDS investment strategy, which he greatly admired, and simplified his findings for me: When you give a hundred bucks to most churches they spend it, generally on a good cause. When you give the LDS Church a hundred bucks, it invests it, often in companies that the Church controls. These investments are usually safe with a good return. After several years, the hundred bucks grows to a thousand bucks or more. The Church spends some of the profit but generally keeps the principal intact. The do-

nation becomes a source of perpetual wealth. Our ward expenditures are modest in comparison to those of other nearby churches and in comparison to the amount of money collected by tithing. Where this extra money goes is not obvious to me—perhaps to education (BYU), temples, buildings in other countries, etc. But how we spend the money is a separate issue. That we have more than ample funds and therefore choices for the leaders in how to spend them is a tremendous strength and the envy of every other church on the landscape.

Thank you, Brother Rees, for your article. I look forward to more articles that trumpet the strengths and goodness of the LDS Church from the perspectives of the writers of *Dialogue*.

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