

THE PROVO TABERNACLE AND INTERFAITH COLLABORATION

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In October of 1996, Father William Flegge and his St. Francis of Assisi parish in Provo had a problem. Renovations had left their beautiful Spanish Mission-style building unsafe for the high volume of parishioners expected for the upcoming Christmas services. That was when Father Flegge telephoned LDS Church headquarters to ask if Christmas Mass could be held at the Provo Tabernacle. In addition to welcoming Father Flegge and his flock to the tabernacle, LDS leaders invited them to bring into the tabernacle whatever sacred dress, objects, and symbols they needed to realize this important ceremony.¹ Julie Boerio-Goates,

This paper uses interviews and a survey to explore the Provo Tabernacle's rather unlikely function as a space for people of different faiths to meet (see Provo Tabernacle Online Survey in appendix A). I conducted interviews with Kathryn Allen, Linda Walton, Julie Boerio-Goates, Ben Pykles, and Sid Unrau. Kathryn Allen, a Mormon, directed the Provo Arts Council; Linda Walton, a Seventh-day Adventist, founded the Utah Valley Interfaith Club; Julie Boerio-Goates, a BYU chemistry professor and St. Francis pastoral coordinator, helped stage the 1996 Christmas Mass; Ben Pykles, Curator of Historic Sites for the LDS Church History Department, and Sid Unrau, a Mormon attorney, attended the 1996 Mass with Mormon friends. Each interviewee shares interfaith experiences, some positive and some negative, and each remembers how the tabernacle brought the various denominations of Utah Valley together. In addition, I collected data using a small survey of randomly selected Utah County residents concerning the tabernacle's transformation into an LDS temple.

1. Julie Boerio-Goates (pastoral coordinator, St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church), Orem, Utah, in discussion with the author, Mar. 17, 2015. Digital recording.

pastoral coordinator for the parish, had plenty of experience staging Mass in the three-hundred-seat St. Francis building but was nervous about staging it in the two-thousand-seat tabernacle. The parish moved a lot of materials necessary for Christmas Mass from the St. Francis church, but since the tabernacle was so much bigger than St. Francis, more set dressing was needed. Serendipitously, seminarian Patrick Elliot had just been assigned to the parish as an assistant. Elliot had a good eye and knew where to find additional decorations. On December 24, two Christmas Masses were held in the evening and one at midnight.² These services provide a vivid illustration of the Provo Tabernacle's use for interfaith cooperation.

The Provo Tabernacle was imprinted with its builders' devotion to God. A carefully crafted Gothic Revival structure with detailed woodwork, stained glass, and beautiful masonry, it was a substantial and impressive edifice built to host a community's most important religious and civic meetings, present great artists, and symbolize Mormon faith and vision. Throughout the twentieth century, however, as the Mormon population increased and its architecture became standardized, aging tabernacles like this one struggled to maintain their quality and position as houses of worship.³ Though it continued to host religious services, the Provo Tabernacle also became the principal venue for events sponsored by the Provo Arts Council, as well as the home of the Utah Valley Symphony. Most of its cultural events were religious—live performances of Handel's *Messiah*, nativity scenes, bell-ringing concerts, National Day of Prayer ceremonies—and some were secular. Because of its community function, its audience became somewhat nondenominational, and its

2. Associated Press, "Catholics Celebrate Mass in Provo Tabernacle," *Deseret News*, Dec. 25, 1996, <https://www.deseretnews.com/article/532776/CATHOLICS-CELEBRATE-MASS-IN-PROVO-TABERNACLE.html>.

3. Mark Leone, "Why the Coalville Tabernacle Had to be Razed," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 2 (1973): 38.

aura inclusive.⁴ The three services of Catholic Mass in 1996 brought together people of different denominations, and those services stand as an extraordinary moment in Utah Valley's religious history.⁵

After the tabernacle was gutted by fire in December 2010, the LDS faith provided a framework for interpreting this terrible loss. When the Church announced that the tabernacle would be rebuilt as a temple, the fire seemed almost to have played a helpful role in transforming the building for a higher purpose. The metaphor of the temple rising from the ashes was invoked and captured a consummate mood that persisted after reconstruction began.⁶ Such a mood leaves little room for mourning the loss of Provo's historic center of interfaith activity. In the tabernacle, Utah County citizens could all come together and enjoy various activities, regardless of belief; but now that the tabernacle is an LDS temple, that is no longer the case. My interviews and survey results suggest that religious groups in Utah Valley have remained isolated from each other and that the area's believers need *more* places, not fewer, to come together.

The role the tabernacle played in creating interfaith community was highlighted at its memorial service on December 19, 2010 at Utah Valley University. On that occasion, UVU president Matthew Holland said this:

The tabernacle has been the place of my sweetest moments of communion with believers not of my particular faith. As Provo Seventh-day Adventist pastor Carlos Garcia and head elder Brad E. Walton said, "Our congregation has been welcomed to that facility on many occasions. . . . It was not only a beautiful, historic building, but a place where we were

4. Genelle Pugmire, "1898–2010: Provo Tabernacle Remembered as Gathering Place," *Daily Herald*, Dec. 18, 2010, http://www.heraldextra.com/special-section/tabernacletemple/provo-tabernacle-remembered-as-gathering-place/article_f78997a6-0a3b-11e0-abe0-001cc4c002e0.html.

5. Associated Press, "Catholics Celebrate Mass in Provo Tabernacle."

6. Judy Fletcher Davis and Wilson J. Ong, *Out of the Ashes: From Tabernacle to Temple* (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 2015).

all part of a greater community.” What a unifying and uplifting power those moments have been.⁷

Provo city fire marshal Lynn Schofield remembered the announcement of the new temple this way: “It was bittersweet. I love the concept of a temple, but I also know how much the tabernacle meant to the greater community. . . . There will never be another organ recital or concert or Mass or community event there.”⁸ While there are large secular buildings able to host citizens of all denominations in Utah Valley, the tabernacle was unique in that it was a religious space in which people of different faiths could gather. The comments of Holland and Schofield attest to the fact that interfaith gatherings are powerful and can teach a diverse community about respect, love, and unity.

The 1996 Christmas Mass held at the tabernacle assembled an unusual collection of worshippers. Julie Boerio-Goates described the effect the Mass had on the relationship between Mormons and Catholics:

[It] opened a door for collaboration, for participation, that has continued to accelerate, to broaden, and to accelerate. So, I’m just thrilled. I mean, when I look back at it I think it was one of the highlights of my life to be involved in it.⁹

During the midnight Mass, the crowd applauded when Father Flegge said the Mormons would be blessed for welcoming them into their building.¹⁰ It was a moment of palpable goodwill. Boerio-Goates said,

7. Genelle Pugmire, “Provo Tabernacle: A Gem in Utah History,” *Provo City Center Temple: A Special Publication of the Daily Herald*, Jan. 10, 2016, 17. Available to view online at <https://issuu.com/dailyheraldofutahvalley/docs/provocitycentertemple2016>.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Julie Boerio-Goates, Orem, Utah, in discussion with the author, Mar. 17, 2015.

10. Genelle Pugmire, “Provo Tabernacle a Gem in Utah History,” *Daily Herald*, Mar. 4, 2016, http://www.heraldextra.com/special-section/provocitycentertemple/story/provo-tabernacle-a-gem-in-utah-history/article_b3b92a15-8ca0-5d25-b499-f03cb28157cb.html.

“The experience for a lot of the Catholics who had lived here all their lives, who’d always felt that they were just, you know, that they’d had to deal with kids who weren’t allowed to play with them . . . there were some who were kind of unrighteously [saying] ‘Ha ha ha, let’s put as many crucifixes in there as we can.’”¹¹ But Boerio-Goates reminded them that this attitude was not consistent with the spirit of the season:

[The Mormons] allowed us to do things that they would not ordinarily, like [have] candles and wine and crucifixes. We were told we could do Mass however we needed. We had incense. We had all the things that are associated, especially . . . for a Christmas Mass . . . that are generally . . . toxic. You know, right now it wouldn’t be such a surprise to me, but I do think that in some ways that opened a door.¹²

The “door” Boerio-Goates refers to is perhaps not one between the religious institutions themselves but between their members. She has written before about the challenges of being a Catholic in a Mormon community:

As I socialize with non-Mormon friends in Utah and listen to the latest Mormon horror story, I feel compelled to remind my friends that Mormons don’t hold the patent on insensitivity and that the majority should not be condemned because of a few. On the other hand, I find that Latter-day Saints, particularly those who have served missions in Mexico or South America, have a very skewed view of the American Catholic Church. Many do not realize that crucifixes and holy cards serve the same function in our homes as pictures of prophets or temples do in theirs.¹³

When the Mormons welcomed all the Catholic symbols and objects into the tabernacle, Boerio-Goates felt this was a step toward a better relationship between these communities.

11. Julie Boerio-Goates, Orem, Utah, in discussion with the author, Mar. 17, 2015.

12. Ibid.

13. Julie Boerio-Goates, “Through a Stained-Glass Window,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 24, no. 1 (1991): 1.

Almost twenty years later, many parishioners have no memory of the Christmas Mass held at the tabernacle. The St. Francis parish has relocated to a beautiful twelve-hundred-seat church in Orem, and there is an annual gathering in the new building that is reminiscent of the inclusive spirit of that Christmas Mass in 1996. Each year, the new St. Francis parish hosts UVU's primarily Mormon choral showcase. According to Boerio-Goates, some members aren't too happy about this arrangement:

The Spanish community don't like the idea of having, especially Mormons, come to sing in this space. They've been quite angry about it. And one of the lines that I have taken is that for me, personally, it's a way of saying "Thanks." Most of them weren't here in 1996 . . . so they don't know. It's a way of saying thanks for letting us have the tabernacle. When we needed a space, they opened the doors. Sharing sacred space continues to be a means of building relationships between members of different faiths.¹⁴

Mormons and Catholics in the valley often live their lives without much interaction, except on rare occasions when sacred spaces bring them together. For example, Catholic Brigham Young University student Vanessa Moffatt says she often feels like an outsider "when she is not invited to ward activities or discussions that revolve around the LDS Church."¹⁵ When a Catholic woman considering relocating to Provo asked for advice on the Catholic Answers Forum website, one response cautioned her that she may feel isolated from neighbors because "most of the things they do revolve around their local ward (like a parish). So,

14. Julie Boerio-Goates, Orem, Utah, in discussion with the author, Mar. 17, 2015.

15. Kristine Hoyt, "Catholic Utahns Share Experiences Living Within LDS Community," *The Daily Universe*, May 12, 2017, <http://universe.byu.edu/2017/05/12/final-story-catholic-utahns-share-their-experiences-while-living-among-lds-people>.

if you're not a member of the ward and attending there, you're likely to be left out of a lot of things."¹⁶

Interfaith relations can also be impeded by the fear that collaboration implies acceptance or endorsement of a set of beliefs. The St. Francis parish wanted to restage Christmas Mass at the tabernacle in 1997, but the diocese was opposed. Publicity from the film *The God Makers* (a critical exposé about perceived negative aspects of Mormon doctrine), released fifteen years earlier, had created antipathy toward the Mormons among other Christian denominations; this atmosphere put pressure on the diocese to avoid a relationship that could appear to condone Mormon doctrine.

A similar apprehension concerned the associates of Sid Unrau, a Mormon and a Provo attorney. Unrau has the habit of annually attending Christmas Mass. His Mormon friends were typically uneasy about going with him, but when, in 1996, Mass was held at the tabernacle, it was much easier to convince them to join him. Unrau said, "It was a very beautiful experience. One of the things that was noticeable to me was there was about a nine-foot cross or something, it was . . . a big cross right up in front of the organ pipes."¹⁷ Unrau's experience illustrates both the trepidation people feel about participating in the practices of other faiths, but also the power of this shared experience to create common ground. He continued, "We really have a lot in common [with Catholics]. I mean, every Christmas carol they sang was the same as ours . . . and . . . it's about half in Spanish and half in English."¹⁸

The apprehension Unrau's friends felt about attending a Catholic service underscores the courage it takes to venture beyond one's own

16. anp1215, reply to 2cherubs, "Catholics in Mormon Country," Catholic Answers Forums, Mar. 13, 2012, <https://forums.catholic.com/t/catholics-in-mormon-country/277095/2>.

17. Sid Unrau (attorney), Provo, Utah, in discussion with the author, Dec. 2015. Digital recording.

18. Ibid.

community. Interfaith relationships can be frightening if a person senses their faith will be attacked. Unrau said:

Mormons are especially hated. . . . I've been to gatherings, professional gatherings where I cannot imagine other people being maligned like Mormons are. We're called liars, worshippers of a different god, things like that. . . . I can't imagine someone taking sacred experiences from another religion and making a play like the *Book of Mormon* musical. . . . I think sometimes Mormons think we need to be isolationist.¹⁹

Like the reference Boerio-Goates made to Catholic children not being welcome to play with Mormon children, these experiences of insensitivity create fear on both sides. The Christmas Mass at the tabernacle was a powerful gesture of openness and support that helped to dispel fears and right wrongs on a local level. Unrau continued:

One of the things they say when they meet in the beginning is . . . "We look forward to the day when there will be one faith and one baptism. Then all of our Christian friends will recognize that we're all part of the body of Christ." And I loved that part. . . . And so, they said that they were so thankful that we welcomed them.²⁰

Opening the tabernacle to the St. Francis parish healed the wounds of minority Catholics and provided an occasion for the Mormon majority to get to know their neighbors. Unrau's friends were more willing to venture into a Catholic Mass when it happened in a familiar space.

The tabernacle also hosted a handful of National Prayer Day services organized by Seventh-day Adventist Linda Walton. Member of the Utah Valley Ministerial Association,²¹ Walton said, "We've had people come in from out of the area and they are completely flabbergasted at how

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Note that the organization changed its name to Utah Valley Interfaith Association in 2016, after I spoke with Linda.

friendly and not antagonistic that event is.”²² She reminisces proudly about a year she welcomed a group of picketing atheists who had gathered outside the prayer meeting. Walton appreciated the value of having the flexible religious space a tabernacle provides: “There’s no big hall to have a Fourth of July thing, a National Day of Prayer thing. I guess I could have it at one of the other places, but we like to have it in a religious place because it gets people into places they’ve never been.”²³ The tabernacle’s special presence lent a solemn tone to hybrid sacred/secular events.

Though it was an impressive religious space, the tabernacle could also be transformed into a secular arena. For many years the tabernacle was the main venue for the Provo Arts Council, providing an inexpensive space for many well-attended musical events. Kathryn Allen, former director of the Provo Arts Council, recalled:

Most of the programming in there was free, even though there were several nonprofits that were allowed to charge at the door, such as the Symphony. And the Provo Arts Council was also allowed to charge for certain programs because we were, as such, a nonprofit so . . . I was sorry. I was sad to hear they were not going to recreate it as a tabernacle, but delighted that they were going to keep it.²⁴

Allen helped create the Community Music Series in 1983, which started in the Provo Council Chambers, then was “moved to the foyer, then to the Provo Tabernacle, [and] at the end of the series, more than twenty thousand people were attending free concerts on Monday nights.”²⁵ In

22. Linda Walton (founder, The Walton Group), Provo, Utah, in discussion with the author, Nov. 5, 2015. Digital recording.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Kathryn Allen (former director, Provo Arts Council), Provo, Utah, in discussion with the author, Dec. 28, 2015. Digital recording.

25. Genelle Pugmire, “Provo to Have an Arts Council, Again,” *Daily Herald*, Dec. 8, 2016, https://www.heraldextra.com/news/local/central/provo/provo-to-have-an-arts-council-again/article_4e2b6019-44e8-5673-bdae-22e253e59239.html.

1954, this was called the Community Concert Series. It was sponsored by Brigham Young University, free of charge to the public, and included “classical, Romantic, and contemporary composers.”²⁶ Ironically, this series ended when, in 2002, the LDS Church closed their buildings on Monday nights in order to support family home evening.²⁷

Some audience members were uncomfortable with more secular performers in the tabernacle, as the following story illustrates:

We had a new set of service missionaries . . . and we had Ryan Shupe and the RubberBand. People got up and started dancing in the aisles. And this couple sat there as long as they could bear seeing people dancing in their beloved tabernacle and they [left the room]. . . . Bless their hearts. And yes, I did hear about it from someone on a stake level. And I said, “You know, it is a community center.” . . . The idea was to have enough variety to bring people in and so that every type or culture of people would want to come to something.²⁸

Though this building housed a variety of meetings, it was indelibly a religious space.

To further understand the significance of the building in interfaith cooperation, I conducted a small survey to hear from random Utah citizens.²⁹ Respondents were asked about their knowledge of the tabernacle and their attendance habits. Eighty-six percent of respondents reported

26. *Daily Herald*, Nov. 21, 1954. Available online with a subscription at <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/7742422>.

27. Gordon B. Hinckley, “To Men of the Priesthood,” Oct. 2002, <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2002/10/to-men-of-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

28. See n. 24.

29. In the spring of 2015, an email database was used to field a survey of nineteen statements to one hundred Utah County residents, to which they responded using a Likert scale. Twenty-three percent of those surveyed reported residing in Utah for fewer than five years, 45 percent for six to twenty years, and 32 percent for twenty-one years or longer. Sixty-four percent identified as female and 36 percent as male, and 42 percent were younger than thirty while 58 percent were older.

knowing the tabernacle was used as a community center for the arts and other activities, but only 54 percent reported knowing that it was used for events of religious groups other than Mormon, such as Catholic Mass. Forty-nine percent of respondents had attended something other than a Mormon meeting there.

At the middle and end of the survey, respondents had the opportunity to write comments. Most middle section comments referred to musical events, a few to graduations, a few to nativities, one to Catholic Mass, and one to the National Day of Prayer. Because the end of the survey focused on the tabernacle's interfaith role, the exclusive nature of temples, and the fact that some will lose access to the tabernacle after its reconstruction as a temple, respondents' final comments tended to address these issues.

Because the question of temple attendance is of such importance to this study, respondents chose from the following list of religious identifiers: unaffiliated (4 percent), non-believer (1 percent), temple-attending Mormon (54 percent), church-attending Mormon (24 percent), inactive believing Mormon (10 percent), inactive nonbelieving Mormon (1 percent), religion other than Mormon (6 percent), and atheist (1 percent). These distinctions are important in studying attitudes about transforming a building the access to which depends upon one's relationship to temple attendance. A total of 116 options were checked for the one hundred completed surveys. Eighty-eight percent of the options checked identified the respondent in some way with Mormonism. Using more nuanced religious identifiers allowed an examination of not only the interfaith community between Mormons and other denominations, but more particularly, that within Mormonism itself.

It is interesting that 93 percent of respondents expressed at least some agreement with the statement "It is important for Provo to nurture its interfaith community," yet only 44 percent agreed with "I will miss the interfaith opportunities the tabernacle provided." For some reason, respondents very strongly support interfaith community in the abstract,

but that support drops off considerably for the tabernacle in particular. An even larger drop-off in support occurs in response to the statement “I wish it had been restored as a tabernacle” which receives only 24 percent agreement of any kind. Seventy-nine percent of respondents expressed at least some agreement with the statement “I am pleased it is being rebuilt as a temple.”

Maybe these contradictions can be explained by age and attendance rates. With 40 percent of respondents under the age of thirty—and of those, 30 percent never having attended the tabernacle, and 47 percent attending five or fewer times—it could be that respondents simply didn’t have enough experience with the tabernacle to appreciate its value. After all, 46 percent of respondents were not even aware that the tabernacle hosted events of faiths other than Mormon. Whatever the reason, a cross tabulation of responses to “I wish it had been restored as a tabernacle” with religious affiliation indicates that the desire to nurture interfaith community on the one hand and enthusiasm for temples on the other creates a dissonance for temple attenders.

As temple attendance declines among respondents, the desire for tabernacle restoration increases. There could be a number of reasons for this. First, the decision to transform the tabernacle into a temple had already been made when the survey was administered; therefore, the loss of the tabernacle is in conflict with the gain of a temple. Second, temple-attending respondents may feel that to wish for tabernacle reconstruction is to disagree with Church leadership. Third, it simply makes sense that temple attenders are less likely to miss the tabernacle since they will still have access to it as a temple.

The statement “I feel bad that people without temple recommends will lose access to the former tabernacle,” with which 46 percent of respondents expressed some agreement, goes the furthest to suggest that the respondent has some responsibility in the interfaith relationship. When temples are new buildings, their exclusive function is not emphasized, but when a public space is redesigned to become private,

the celebration that typically accompanies a temple opening also involves some disappointment. The phrasing “I feel bad people without recommends will lose access” reminds temple-attending respondents that in the case of the tabernacle reconstruction their gain is someone’s loss: someone with a different faith. A cross tabulation of the “I feel bad” statement with religious affiliation shows that 41 percent of temple-attending Mormons feel bad that people without recommends will lose access to the former tabernacle. The percentage of people who feel bad about lost access increases among populations who are not temple-attending, with 46 percent of church-attending Mormons and 83 percent of inactive believing Mormons reporting feeling bad. Perhaps non-temple-attending Mormons feel bad about lost access because they are part of the population losing access. It could also be that their reasons for not attending the temple, such as faith crises, make them more sensitive than temple attenders to populations that will lose access such as non-religious people.

Comments at the end of the survey include the most evident mental grappling with responsibility to a local interfaith community. Consider the following: “I think it is fine being built as a temple. Since they won’t be able to have the multi-faith activities there anymore though there should probably be another option for that. It is good for people of different faiths to find common ground in different things.” Some seemed to only realize the consequences the tabernacle’s reconstruction would have on the community as they were taking the survey: “I didn’t know it was being rebuilt as a temple[. I]t was a beautiful building and there are not many places if any like that in Provo so it’s sad that the public won’t be able to enjoy it anymore.”

Several comments try to make sense of the reconstruction by suggesting the city build a new venue for interfaith activities.³⁰ What these

30. “I feel it will be an asset to the community and will be a beautiful part of town for people of many faiths to visit. It also provides Provo with another opportunity to build something that can host more intercultural events, which

comments don't consider is that a new structure would most likely not be religious. Tabernacles, which are large religious structures that can be used for both civic and religious meetings, are no longer built by the LDS Church. The closest analogue is the Conference Center in Salt Lake City, which does host art events that can be attended by the entire community. Perhaps the LDS Church decided that the number of resources necessary to restore the tabernacle after the fire could not be justified for any other structure than a temple; priority was given to temple work rather than community work. This is understandable given the LDS Church's mission, but the loss of a public religious venue like the tabernacle means that citizens have fewer and fewer opportunities to share their faith with each other.

Some comments suggest BYU or the Covey Center as a solution to this.³¹ But unlike the tabernacle, BYU and the Covey Center require fees for the use of their buildings. Significantly, the tabernacle, due to the generosity of the LDS Church, was made available to various organizations for free. One respondent argues for restoring the building as a tabernacle out of respect for early Utah settlers.³² Ironically, this argument is often used to advocate for its restoration as a temple. For example, LDS Church historic sites curator Dr. Benjamin Pykles notes significantly that once the temple is operating, all of the saving ordinances

might also help stimulate the economy"; "It was nice, but it burned down in a fire. Even if it was rebuilt, it wouldn't be the same. If the city needs a cultural center it can build it somewhere else."

31. "I'm afraid I never visited it as a tabernacle. I feel that interfaith activities could be held elsewhere—there are many places to meet in Provo—why not a BYU center or something that can accommodate a lot of people?"

32. "It seems more special to remodel for the purpose the pioneers had meant it for, which is a tabernacle. I do appreciate the fact that the [C]hurch cleaned up and made downtown Provo much more beautiful, but I think they could have done so while still remodeling the building as a tabernacle. If the [C]hurch felt they really needed a second temple in Provo, they probably could have built an entirely new one in addition to the tabernacle."

(baptism, sacrament, temple endowment) will have been performed on this one city block, making it a “cosmology of Mormon worship.”³³

Some comments, however, simply seem to ignore the question of Provo’s interfaith community: “It’s great they are turning it into a temple. Modern day revelation”; “I think it’s wonderful that it has been turned into a temple. I think it will bless the lives of the people in Provo to have two temples.” But most still reveal a struggle to reconcile the excitement about the new temple with the reality of excluding the non-temple-attending public: “I’m super excited for it to become a temple. I think it’s awesome! I’m sorry some people feel bad about that, but I can’t wait for it to be completed as a temple!!!”; “It is a historic and beautiful building and it will continue to be that but most of all it was created to glorify and serve the Lord and there is no better way of doing that than being a temple. There will be other places and opportunities to support interfaith involvement and community activities.”

More than one comment skirts the question of lost access by suggesting that non-temple attenders visit during the limited open house period.³⁴ One comment identifies the respondent as part of the population who will lose access: “I’m glad it’s being fixed up but kind of sad I will be locked out.” Others express the bitter experience of being a minority: “I honestly do not care whether or not there is a tabernacle or temple. Either do not matter to me. They do not recognize my religious beliefs”;

33. Benjamin Pykles (historic sites curator, LDS Church), Orem, Utah, in discussion with the author, Jan. 30, 2014.

34. “Anyone who wants to go through the temple when it’s done can, before it is dedicated,” or “There are many other venues where people of all faiths can hold interfaith meetings, performances, and concerts. This decision by the LDS Church preserves and repurposes an historic building which has been an important part of the community for more than a century. I’m just grateful that it will continue to be a part of the skyline. The exterior will still be accessible to others in the community and they will be able to visit the interior and learn more about its renovation and new purpose during the ‘open house’ prior to the dedication.”

“The separation of church and state never happens anywhere in Utah so the ‘church’ deciding Provo needed another temple was strictly a money grabbing event once again.” Others express their concern without letting on which group they are part of, for instance: “I wish it was open to all faiths. Utah used to be home to so many Mormons. Now I’ve heard less than half the population is Mormon. It saddens me that such a wealthy church shuts its doors to others during time of need or for any reason.”

Finally, one comment implied that non-temple attenders need only address their own unworthiness and become temple-attending again in order to enjoy the building: “If there are LDS people who are sad that they cannot attend anything in the former Provo Tabernacle, then I am sure that everyone would invite them to alter whatever must be altered to be able to attend. I am sad, too, but if they are LDS, and it means so much to them, then that is what they would need to do.” In addition to ignoring non-LDS citizens, this comment seems to me unwilling to consider reasons other than irresponsibility that an individual may have for not obtaining a temple recommend, such as a struggle for faith in general or regarding a particular doctrine. The comment may illustrate the need among Mormons to better acknowledge the many gradations of faith within Mormon communities and those struggles that require greater patience and increased communication to overcome.

This study shows that the more intimately individuals were connected with the tabernacle and its function in support of interfaith community, the more they wished it had been restored as a tabernacle. The interviews were conducted with individuals who had considerable experience with and love for the tabernacle, and therefore express more admiration for its ability to build bridges between denominations. Survey data, on the other hand, show that a dissonance has been created for temple-attending Mormons between an abstract support of interfaith community and a more concrete enthusiasm for temple-building. One example of this dissonance is that relatively low rates of temple attenders report feeling bad about others’ lost access to the building, but a propor-

tionally higher number address and struggle with the issue of lost access in their concluding comments. Thus, the value of interfaith community comes up against the value of temples, and while a few are dismissive of people who are not temple-attending Mormons in their final comments, the majority are not: the majority address the problem and are trying to solve it. The survey also highlights that interfaith boundaries are not only found between Mormons and other denominations, but also within Mormonism itself.

The interviews clearly show the effectiveness of events like the 1996 Christmas Mass in generating goodwill and understanding between religious groups. By making the tabernacle available for interfaith events, the LDS Church opened doors and reached across religious boundaries to establish friendships. The tabernacle, as a community religious space, created opportunities for interfaith experience—something temple-attending Mormons say they value. A challenge exists, therefore, for this group in particular to continue, in the absence of shared sacred space, to find ways to build interfaith bridges.

Appendix A

Provo Tabernacle Online Survey

1. How long have you been a resident of Utah?

0–5 years 6–10 years 11–15 years 16–20 years 21+ years

2. I am

Male Female

3. What is your age?

Under 20 21–30 31–40 41–60 61–80 Over 80

4. Which of the following best describes your religious status. Check one or more.

Unaffiliated
Nonbeliever
Temple attending Mormon
Church attending Mormon
Inactive believing Mormon
Inactive non-believing Mormon
Religion other than Mormon
Atheist

5. Estimate how many events you have attended at the tabernacle.
0–5 6–10 11–20 20+

6. I am aware that the tabernacle was a center for community arts, activities, and performances.
Yes No

7. I am aware the tabernacle hosted events of faiths other than Mormon such as Catholic Easter Mass.
Yes No

8. I have attended an event at the tabernacle other than a Mormon ward or stake meeting.
Yes No

9. Do you remember details about that event or another that you would like to share?

Participants were given a scale of Strongly Agree-Agree-Somewhat Agree-Somewhat Disagree-Disagree-Strongly Disagree to respond to statements 10–19.

10. It is important for Provo to nurture its interfaith community.

11. I will miss the interfaith activities the tabernacle provided.

12. The new temple will improve downtown Provo aesthetically and/or economically.

13. I have strong feelings about the Provo Tabernacle.

Screening statements added at various points in the survey to assure participant residency and engagement result in this omission of numbers 14–15.

16. I wish it had been restored as a tabernacle.

17. I plan on attending the new temple.

18. I feel bad that people without temple recommends will lose access to the new temple.

19. I am pleased it is being rebuilt as a temple.

20. Are there any other experiences of or feelings about the Provo Tabernacle that you would like to share?