

THE NEW CALLING

Robert Bennett

*No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be,
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.*
—T. S. Eliot, from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

I accepted the new calling, of course. Without reservation. My father raised me to always go wherever God asks me to go and all. Even though I suspected that Bishop Oaks was just being petty. He never came right out and officially declared it a punishment, of course, but the whole ward knew that it was. I mean, they had all heard what I said in fast and testimony meeting, and the bishop couldn't even wait two weeks before handing me my pink slip, promptly releasing me as the second counselor in the elders quorum presidency. The timing wasn't just suspicious; it was outright obvious, palpably premeditated. Bishop Oaks was sending a clear, unequivocal message: A price had to be paid for speaking out in sacrament meeting like that, for not toeing the party line in public. At least in the Boise Idaho West Stake Indian Lakes Ward. At least as long as Bishop Heber C. Oaks was presiding. Come hell or high water, he was going to run a tight ship, so there was not going to be some kind of mutiny under his watch. No, it's all “aye, aye, captain” or you'll swab the decks around here. In times like these, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell the Christians from the pirates.

Maybe I never should have said it. Maybe this whole new calling thing was just part of some larger, divinely inspired repentance process designed to bring me back in line. Only when I was a kid—back in the early sixties—things were simpler. There were just the three R's: Recognize your sin, feel Remorse for it, and Resolve not to do it again. But nowadays the R's seem to keep multiplying. Restitution. Reformation. Realization. Before you knew it, there were five or seven. Renunciation. Requisition. Redemption. On a good day, sometimes as many as nine or even more. Regeneration. Renewal. Recovery. It has gotten to the point where there is a new R almost every week, and now they are telling me that I need to Recant, too. Give me a break! We all know that's not going to happen. If you put me in the same situation again, if I had to do it all over, we all know that I would say the exact same thing. Even when Brother Richardson cornered me after the meeting, I didn't back down, and my position hasn't changed one bit. If anything, stating it publicly has only strengthened my resolve.

Normally, I'm not one to make waves. Sure, I occasionally read *Dialogue* and *Sunstone*, but that doesn't mean that I don't believe in the Book of Mormon, and it clearly states that anyone with the spirit of contention is of the devil. So, I'm not one to casually contend, but this time somebody had to say something, and who else was going to do it? Not Brother Richardson or Sister Smoot. That's for sure. They always bought (and sold) the party line—hook, line, and sinker. Sure, Sister Anderson and Brother Graham were somewhat more nuanced, perhaps even sympathetic—behind closed doors at any rate—but neither of them had the backbone to ever stand up and say anything controversial in public. So, the lot fell to me, and I simply said what had to be said. As respectfully as I could, of course, but that doesn't mean that I pulled any punches. After all, my mother raised me to be bold and courageous, like Nephi and the armies of Helaman, so let's just say that everybody in the congregation knew exactly what I was saying and exactly why I was saying it. If this new calling is meant to be some kind of punishment for saying what had to be said, then I can live with that. After all, I knew

perfectly well the risk that I was taking. You can't say anything with a certain disposition in this church without assuming some level of risk. You'd have to be a real rookie to not know at least that much.

Not that getting called as the assistant ward librarian raised me to the level of a martyr. I wasn't some latter-day Giordano Bruno. Though he was, of course, a personal hero of mine. You always have to respect someone who isn't afraid to speak out and take a stand in front of a tough crowd. Well, I had spoken out, and I had taken my stand, and now it looked like I was going to spend the second hour every week standing next to a multifunctional Xerox Versalink C505 ConnectKey technology-enabled smart workplace assistant, handing out ragged old-school Bibles and triple combinations to smartphoneless Primary kids and checking out state-of-the-art audiovisual equipment to their technologically illiterate parents. The irony wasn't lost on me: I have been the director of special collections at the university for almost three decades now, and I am the only three-time past vice treasurer of the Association of College and Research Libraries, and now my new calling is to be a librarian, and an assistant librarian at that. Go figure.

So, I was promptly issued my new calling, and I was even sustained by the ward, unanimously—though I did notice that Sister Smoot and Brother Richardson never raised their hands either way—but I never did get officially set apart. Maybe the bishop was just trying to avoid me. You know, hoping to prevent an ugly confrontation over the substance of what I had said. Or maybe he was just busy. He had to call a new Sunday School presidency, and he was shuffling around a few of the Young Women counselors, after all. And tithing settlement was coming up, too, so it's not like he was just sitting around looking for things to do. Or maybe it just wasn't one of those callings. Maybe you don't really need the power of the priesthood or any special blessings from heaven to remember to always choose the double-sided option whenever possible. You know to save paper costs for the Lord's sacred tithing funds—and to protect the environment, of course. And maybe you don't really need to rely on anything more than the arm of flesh

to find the right pictures in the Gospel Arts Library. They are clearly numbered, after all, and there is always the head ward librarian, Sister Nelson, to show me the ropes if I ever lose my way.

And maybe they are right. Maybe I don't need the spirit of discernment or the gift of prophecy to hand out fraying hymn books or make sure the Roku is working properly. But just because I was never set apart, and just because I'm not exactly exercising priesthood keys, doesn't mean that I don't have to magnify my calling just like everybody else. As the Good Book says, there are diversities of gifts, differences of administration, and even multiplicities of operations, but the same God worketh all in all. The body may hath many members, but all the members of that body, being many, are but one body in the Lord, so the foot can't say to the hand, or the knee to the elbow, that one member hath more abundant comeliness than another. No, I am part of a team, the Lord's team, so I am going to step up to the plate and take my pitches just like everyone else in the lineup—even if I just so happen to be batting last. I may be just a guy, but I am the next guy up, so to speak, so I'm not going to let my teammates down.

The only problem was: How exactly do you magnify your calling as an assistant ward librarian? There just aren't any real-life examples in the scriptures. I mean, like Nephi, I, too, could go and do the things the Lord commands, but what exactly are His commandments for being an anxiously engaged assistant ward librarian? There are no sections in the D&C about how to collate copies of the Relief Society newsletter, and the Book of Mormon says nothing about how to pair different colored dry-erase markers with working erasers in individualized Ziploc bags. After all, us librarians aren't called to boldly preach sacred gospel truths like the Apostle Paul or to bring souls unto repentance like the sons of Alma, and you don't exactly need faith or forbearance to use the paper cutter, which is arguably my most serious responsibility. All you need is a little common sense and some basic principles of caution.

I guess that I could have fancied myself some kind of latter-day Mormon, dutifully preserving the records of my people and carefully

curating and editing my tribe's sacred archive of records, but that just seemed to be a delusion of grandeur. After all, Mormon was compiling centuries of golden plates into the most correct of any book on the face of this earth; I was just busy back-cataloguing the greatest hits of the past five decades, the halcyon days, of Church correlation. I wasn't making generation-defining editorial decisions or inserting bold prophetic interpolations to guide the narrative flow of a new book of scripture. I wasn't condensing missionary journals into daring tales of adventure and inspiring spiritual masterpieces. I wasn't carefully interweaving the sacred testimonies of ancient prophets into a brave new tapestry of revelation that would ultimately convince both the Jews and the Gentiles in these latter days. No! I am not Mormon, nor was I meant to be; I am but an attendant assistant ward librarian, one who will do, in a pinch, so I had to be content punching my own weight on this one.



Obviously, the first thing that I needed to do, however, was to hearken unto the counsel of my presiding priesthood authority. After all, obedience is the first law of heaven and the first principle of obtaining righteousness unto the glories of the worlds hereafter, etc., etc. Only that was a little bit awkward. The next man up in my chain of command was Sister Nelson, but I had never served under a woman before. So, it took a little while before I could really envision our relationship in terms of the proper line of priesthood authority. I mean, it felt weird calling my superior simply "Sister." It seemed like I wasn't showing enough respect for her authority. But I couldn't really call her "President" either. She wasn't exactly the president of anything. And we had department heads up at the university, but "Head Nelson" all by itself sounded really awkward. I guess that I could have used the term "Headmistress," but that sounded too British. You know, all Hogwarts and Harry Potter. So, in the end, I really didn't have any other option than to just call her Sister Nelson and trust that she understood that I

meant it with all proper deference to her authority. I wanted to be clear that I always worked under her direction even if we did share many of the same duties and responsibilities.

Next, Sister Nelson and I needed to get on the same page—both with each other and with the librarians in the other wards. Initially, I thought that this obviously meant that we needed to hold some kind of Stake Librarian Executive Committee Correlation Meeting. I even drafted a brief agenda, but Sister Nelson didn't think that was necessary. She said that if we needed to coordinate anything with the other librarians, we usually just jotted something down on a Post-it Note and passed it on to them during the break between meetings. I was pretty sure that she was wrong, but she was my superior, so I deferentially demurred. Just to make sure that we weren't overlooking something important, however, I decided to consult the general Church handbook. The instructions for librarians were quite brief, but, as I suspected, I was right, of course. In a multi-ward building, the agent bishop is supposed to appoint a committee to coordinate the use of the library and manage the budget funds allocated to it. The committee is supposed to include a member of the Sunday School presidency and the head librarian from each ward, but what about the assistant ward librarian? It didn't say anything about me attending the meeting.

So, this put me in something of a pickle: I wanted to magnify my calling, of course, and contribute my heartfelt insights about library procedures and budget constraints, but I also wanted to follow the proper priesthood protocol, which clearly stated that the Stake Librarian Executive Committee Correlation Meeting was for head librarians only. How was I supposed to magnify my calling, however, if I wasn't even invited to the meeting? I guess that I would just have to sustain Sister Nelson's authority and indirectly pass on to her my suggestions through the proper chain of command.

But even this still put me in another pickle: I wanted to correct Sister Nelson and explain to her that the general handbook did call for a Stake Librarian Executive Committee Correlation Meeting, but

I didn't want her to think that I was trying to usurp her authority by going behind her back. I didn't want to throw a wrench in our budding relationship before it had barely even begun, so I prayed about it, but I didn't receive an immediate answer. So, I fasted for additional inspiration, and this time I did receive a distinct impression that maybe I should drop the whole thing and just use Post-it Notes like Sister Nelson had suggested. At least for now. I could always bring up this whole meeting thing later. Besides, it seemed like the old system had been working just fine, and who really needs an extra meeting, especially when you aren't even actually invited to it anyway. Maybe I'd revisit the whole issue in a few months. You know, after Sister Nelson and I developed more of a rapport and after I developed a better understanding of library procedures and policies. If I wasn't going to be attending the meeting myself anyhow, maybe I should start by drafting a white paper first. You know, just to roughly outline some of my most compelling proposals.



I'm not proud of it, but I have to admit that I probably did waste my first couple weeks mostly moping around. Actually, I was pretty much outright sulking, if you want me to be perfectly honest. Being demoted to the library not only hurt my pride, but it also proved to be a colossal waste of time. Up at the university, the library was such a busy place: There were always acquisitions to make, collections to catalogue, old manuscripts to digitize, and new websites to design. But here at church, all I did was hand out crayons and glue sticks. Maybe the occasional pair of childproof scissors or odds and ends of scrap paper. Between meetings there would be a brief flurry of activity—for five or ten minutes at most—but then the rest of the time was completely dead. All this tedium, however, never seemed to bother Sister Nelson. While I sat there fretting and stewing in my own self-pity about my underutilized talents, she just read a book. She was always so engrossed that I figured

she was just reading some bowdlerized Mormon Harlequin romance, probably about two missionaries who knew each other in the premortal existence, but I asked her anyway: “What are you reading?”

“Anti-Oedipus, Kinship, and the Subject of Affect: Reading Fanon with Deleuze and Guattari,” she replied offhandedly. “It’s a post-colonial analysis of queer concepts of kinship from diverse historical and theoretical perspectives.”

“Deleuze and who?” I asked a little confused.

“Guattari,” she clarified. “They are post-Freudian, post-Marxist French philosophers,” she added as if that made any sense. She said that she had to read it for her philosophy class on post-structuralism, post-modernism, and post-something else. What is it with all the posts these days? It seems like everything, at least up at the university, is all post this or post that, but I don’t pay any attention to all that newfangled nonsense. We didn’t need any posts back when I was at BYU. We mostly just read Hugh Nibley. As far as I’m concerned, he will never go out of style like all of today’s intellectual fads will.

“I guess that’s why I like this calling so much,” Sister Nelson continued. “I can get a little reading done when no one is in here, and with my twins due in two months, heaven knows that I need to keep ahead on the reading lists for my comprehensive exams. Sometimes, I think that the only reason I was called to this calling is because it is so easy I can still do it with my new babies.” Her explanation of our calling wasn’t doing anything to help my bruised ego, of course.

“With all this time on our hands, I just feel like there must be something we could do to magnify our calling a little more,” I lamented out loud, hoping that my comment might spur Sister Nelson into taking our calling a little more seriously. I wasn’t trying to be self-righteous, but back in my day we didn’t do schoolwork on the Sabbath, let alone while we were on the clock for our church calling.

“I usually just read a book,” she stated the obvious. “But if you really want to make yourself useful, I suppose that you could start by cleaning up this place a little. The shelves are so full of outdated handbooks and

unnecessary pamphlets that I don't even know where we are going to put next year's lesson manuals. I'd help you myself, but I have an exam tomorrow, so I really do need to finish this article."

"Oh, that's okay," I reassured her. "I'm not really doing anything anyhow, so I can get started by myself." After looking around a little, however, I saw what she was talking about: There were broken-down film strip projectors, piles of back issues of *Boys' Life*, dust-covered flannel board stories, partially completed stake histories from the 1940s, a tangled mess of unused thirty-year-old audiovisual cables, and mountains of cassette tapes by John Bytheway. Does anybody even own a cassette player anymore, and who is John Bytheway? And the more that I decluttered, the more I realized that this really is a crucial defining moment for ward librarians. Probably the most important age yet in the history of church libraries. With so many newly emergent media technologies and online resources, so much of the library's traditional functions, so many of its historic resources, are becoming obsolete. Consequently, it is our sacred duty as librarians to clean out these outdated materials, but without sacrificing any of the precious resources needed to retain a proper documentary record of who we are as a people, to preserve our religious heritage, and to compile our sacred history. As you can see, this requires a very delicate balancing act: We need to discard all unnecessary and irrelevant documents, but we also need to conserve the most precious records of our tribe.

Ultimately, I did a complete Marie Kondo and ended up discarding almost three-fourths of the library's print collection. Some might say that I was being excessive, and maybe I was walking some kind of avant-garde edge, but I just wanted to magnify my calling and be forward-looking. I didn't want to be trapped in some Gutenbergian echo chamber, nostalgically fetishizing the printed word. Of course, I kept all the musical scores for the choir, since it would look really weird for everyone in the choir to be holding their phones in their faces, and I siloed maybe a half-dozen copies of *Preach My Gospel*, since prospective missionaries really do use that one. But I discarded so many

unnecessary pamphlets and manuals that our empty library shelves were starting to look like a Soviet-era supermarket. Eventually we'd have to think of creative ways to refill all this newly acquired space with innovative new resources, like perhaps expanded ward histories with personal testimonies from the youth, pictures from the ward Trunk-or-Treat, and fun videos of the Relief Society presidency, and maybe that would be the perfect excuse to convene a Ward Librarian Executive Committee Correlation Meeting. I had already begun filling a notebook with possible new ideas. In the meantime, however, I started by putting up an announcement that the library was looking for new books and asking members to donate any old books that they might have lying around. In just two short months, ward members donated over a hundred books, plenty enough to start restocking the library.



Before I could get to that important task, however, Sister Nelson and I had to face several sharp theological dilemmas. For example, what were we supposed to do with our first edition of Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*? Were we supposed to simply discard it because it contains outdated doctrinal errors, especially about Black men and the priesthood, which continues to be such a politically controversial topic? And yet, if we just throw this whole volume out, aren't we destroying a vital part of our sacred tradition, whitewashing the record of what past Church leaders have said, and creating a memory hole that erases our history? And what if some member of the ward wanted to research the historical evolution of the concept of outer darkness? Wouldn't *Mormon Doctrine* be a perfect, almost indispensable, reference? Maybe we should just split the difference and swap our first edition for a revised second edition, but then wouldn't we lose some of the historical poignancy, the unique flavor and character, the personality and genius of the undiluted original? I was torn. As a special collections librarian, I knew the priceless historical value of such a seminal document, so

I couldn't bring myself to discard what was practically a relic, but as a member of the contemporary Church, I must admit that I found its doctrinal errors painfully inconsistent with the forward march of continuing revelation.

I also noticed that we had several copies of the 1990 edition of *For the Strength of Youth*, which labels homosexuality an abomination. More recent editions, however, have revised this down to just a serious sin, so aren't these later revisions more in line with the counsel of the living prophet? I mean won't we as librarians be held responsible by the Lord for loaning out outdated guidelines? And the 1990 edition of *For the Strength of Youth* is hardly a cultural masterpiece that needs to be carefully preserved. After praying together with Sister Nelson, of course, we agreed to keep the McConkie but discard the youth pamphlets. This seemed like an elegant solution: keep pace with the Lord's ongoing process of ever-new, ever-changing revelation while still preserving some seminal traces of the sacred history of our tribe.

It was our print copies of Boyd K. Packer's *To Young Men Only*, however, that posed our greatest dilemma. That had been a crucial moral guidepost for me when I was going through puberty, and it could undoubtedly still inspire new generations of youth to live chaste lives of upstanding moral purity, but the Church has stopped publishing it. I guess that some of its teachings about homosexuality and masturbation have become politically incorrect, but it is a classic sermon delivered with such power and conviction that I hate to part with it. So, what are we supposed to do with our remaining nineteen print copies of this pamphlet in 2020? Maybe we needed to consult someone higher up, so I asked Sister Nelson if I could draft a letter to the bishop and the stake president asking for their guidance. She said that she wasn't sure what to do, so she gave me the green light to write my letter, though she was a little concerned that maybe we shouldn't further burden the bishop and the stake president since they were already so busy with the recent shakeup on the high council and so many temple recommend interviews. I assured her, however, that you can never go wrong by following

the sacred chain of command of the Lord's holy Melchizedek Priesthood. After all, that's what the priesthood line of authority is there for.



Just as I started drafting my letter, however, Brother Brown stopped by to borrow a stapler—and to fill me in on how Ryan's mission was going. Ryan had been in Buenos Aires for six or seven months now, and every week Brother Brown stopped by to show me another round of photos. "Here's Ryan's new companion. Here's Ryan's latest baptism. Here's Ryan at the Rose Garden in Palermo Park. Here's Ryan at Avenida 9 de Julio. Here's Ryan at a barbecue with his new ward."

"Looks like he is at least eating well," I noted casually. "Nothing quite like a fine Argentine grill, but how is the mission work going?"

"Oh, it is going great," he continued. "Ryan and his new companion are now the top baptizers in the mission. They have baptized every week for the last three months. It's BreighEllen he is worried about now."

Brother Brown was, of course, referring to the Hansen girl. She and Ryan had been dating since their junior year of high school. They were our ward's Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Such a perfect couple. Glamorous model citizens, but still spirited and independent-minded. She was supposed to be waiting for him, but from the sound of things, maybe she was having second thoughts. "Did she Dear John him?" I asked cautiously.

"Not yet, but they are going through a rough patch. I can't really go into all the details, of course, but he has been struggling with his testimony. It's nothing serious, just all the usual stuff: the conflicting accounts of the First Vision, Joseph's early treasure digging and folk magic, the rock in the hat, anachronisms in the Book of Mormon, Book of Abraham translation issues, Lamanite DNA, Deutero-Isaiah, Black men and the priesthood, the CES Letter, and, of course, polygamy. Anyhow, when Ryan told BreighEllen that he was having second thoughts about his testimony, she started having second thoughts about

him. They are working things out now, but can you keep them in your prayers?" he asked before hurrying off to class with the stapler.

"I can do more than that," I replied, stopping him momentarily. "Why don't you send him this copy of Richard Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*? Brother Graham just donated a second copy to the library, so we don't really need it. It sure helped me when I was going through my faith crisis. Maybe it could help Ryan regain his testimony, too. And Sister Anderson also donated copies of Terryl and Fiona Givens's *The Crucible of Doubt* and Patrick Mason's *Planted: Belief and Belonging in an Age of Doubt*. Do you think either of those would be helpful?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure that is exactly what Ryan needs right now, but I'll keep it in mind for the future," Brother Brown thanked me politely. I think he was making a real mistake by turning down the Bushman volume. It really is a game-changer, but I suppose he probably knows Ryan's spiritual needs right now better than I do.

That was another part of the calling that I hadn't anticipated: just how many prayers you would be asked to say on behalf of the sick and the afflicted. Sister Call had already stopped by to ask me if I could pray for her brother's cousin's niece who has cancer, and Brother Reynolds had requested that I keep in mind his sister who is going through a divorce. Add to that Sister Kimball's daughter who had recently been in a car wreck and Brother Jones, who was having to decide whether or not to move into assisted living, and there really were a lot of people who needed genuine thoughts and prayers. It was like this every week. Almost everyone who passed by the library had at least one story to share about someone who was struggling with some serious difficulty or another. It was as if people thought that I was some kind of proxy for the temple prayer roll, and pretty soon my wife and I were regularly taking meals, or at least cookies, around to an unending stream of ward members to show our sympathy. It was like having a second, or even third, set of ministering families. Maybe this was just part of my baptismal covenant to bear one another's burdens, or maybe it was an extension of my calling. Only, I wasn't sure because I had never

officially been set apart, so I never received much guidance as to what exactly fell within my job description. Between all these people and their diverse stories, however, I ran out of time and ended up having to draft my letter after I got home.



For the rest of the year, I was kind of adrift. I never did hear back from the bishop or the stake president, but I probably never should have expected to. Clearly, the library wasn't one of their top priorities, but without their guidance Sister Nelson and I didn't really know how to proceed, so I began fasting and praying for new inspiration about what to do next. That was when the spirit of revelation finally hit me—like a ton of bricks—suggesting that maybe I had been approaching my whole calling the wrong way. Maybe restocking the library's physical collection shouldn't be my primary objective; maybe I needed to focus instead on helping ward members access the brave new world of internet resources. After all, this is what we were doing up at the university: moving all the journals online and promoting bold new projects in the digital humanities. Nowadays, everything is virtual this and internet that, but what could we do as ward librarians to help members become more aware of the rapidly proliferating world of electronic materials—the websites and podcasts, the YouTube videos and discussion boards, the apps and Twitter accounts, and the blogs and vlogs—that are increasingly becoming available to a new generation of tech-savvy Latter-day Saints? Sure, most members are already familiar with a few basic resources—like maybe FamilySearch and JustServe—but certainly we could do more to acquaint them with less well-known resources such as the Joseph Smith Papers or the new Gospel Topics essays. In fact, with so many rapidly expanding electronic resources, it is almost like you don't even need a physical ward library anymore, so what is a ward librarian supposed to do?

It seemed to me that we needed to start thinking outside the box and find more innovative ways to introduce ward members to the wild west of the Mormon blogosphere. But I didn't really know where to start. I was totally new to this whole Mormon interweb thing. Sure, I read *Sunstone* and *Dialogue* online, of course, and maybe I've dabbled around the FAIR Mormon site a little looking for clever apologetic answers to tricky questions about Book of Mormon archaeology or the translation of the book of Abraham. Other than that, however, I'm a total neophyte, so I just started with a simple internet search, and I was completely blown away. Almost instantly, a vast, mindboggling online world opened before me. My very first search led me to Mormon Archipelago: Gateway to the Bloggernacle, and immediately I realized that Mormon internet sites are as numerous as the isles of the sea. A vast network of hyperlinks instantly connected me both to prominent well-established sites—such as *By Common Consent* and *Times and Seasons*—and to lesser-known gems: *Mormon Monastery*, *KiwiMormon*, and *Zelophehad's Daughters*. And the blogs themselves covered every conceivable subject, ranging from the relationship between Ugaritic literature and the temple ceremony to book reviews of Orson Scott Card's latest novel. I had never realized that Mormonism could come in so many different shapes, sizes, and colors. This wasn't a brave new online universe; it was an exploding multidimensional pluriverse. And browsing this rapidly expanding virtual cosmos became addictive as I gradually unraveled the vast mosaic of cyber-Mormonism one hyperlink at a time. I was being pulled like taffy in every whichever direction, oscillating wildly between traditionalists and progressives, philosophy professors and stay-at-home housewives, artists and theologians, apologists, and anti-Mormons. By the end of the night—I stayed up until 2:00 a.m.—I felt like Alice falling down the rabbit hole; I had entered a topsy-turvy world full of strange new curiosities and bewildering surprises.

I realized almost immediately, however, that the future of the Church really does depend on how members learn to access these

vast new online resources, and given that the Church has yet to call designated internet facilitators and online specialists, it seems like this task now falls to ward librarians by default. We are the ones on the frontlines of helping members access gospel resources, and just because these resources are increasingly electronic doesn't mean that we can't play a crucial role in helping make them available to the ward. With Sister Nelson's permission and under her direction, of course, I decided to start a small monthly library newsletter. Each issue was about ten or fifteen pages long, and it provided a brief overview of the most seminal emerging Mormon online resources. I just kept browsing from link to link, and before I knew it, I had finished dozens of newsletters, and I still had a pile of notebooks full of ideas for future issues. The Bloggernacle was practically infinite, but I was gradually beginning to feel like my efforts were really making a difference. Almost every week somebody new came by the library to thank me for introducing them to some new online resource. I finally felt like maybe everyone actually can magnify their calling—even an assistant ward librarian.



Just when I was starting to think that I really had things under control, however, that's when the shit hit the fan. Late one night, I was just casually browsing through various obscure Mormon websites—Middle-Aged Mormon Man, Mormon Life Hacker, The Ward Preacher, Teancum's Javelin, Ploni Almoni, stuff like that—gathering ideas for the latest issue of my newsletter, when my next Google search suddenly revealed a series of startling headlines: “Inexcusable Error in Church Manual Revives LDS Church's Dark Racist History,” “Catastrophic Blunder in LDS Manual Revives the Racist Curse of Cain,” and “Will the LDS Church Ever Correct the Racist Doctrines in its New Manuals?” What? Did a new Church manual, probably one in our own ward library even, really contain racist material? This was going to be a nightmare. The Joneses were a new African American couple in our

ward—the first ever in the Indian Lakes Ward, probably in the entire Boise Idaho West Stake—and Brother Jones was very sensitive about racial issues. As he should be. As the Lord Himself is. Brother Jones was a new professor of African American Studies at Boise State, and he wasn't going to be happy to hear that the Church had just published a racist manual, so I really had to get out in front of this one.

But first I had to even figure out what was going on, so I quickly scanned everything that I could find: the *Salt Lake Tribune*, *By Common Consent*, Radio Free Mormon, LDS Discussions, and especially several deeply moving articles in *Exponent II*. What a disaster! Turns out that the Church's new 2020 *Come, Follow Me* manual, the same one that we had just freshly stocked twelve new copies of in our own ward library, describes the Lamanites' dark skin as the sign of a curse from God. This was, indeed, an unfortunate blast from the Church's racist past, backed by a quotation from a previous prophet no less, but it wasn't a doctrine that the Church currently teaches anymore, so how did it turn up in a newly printed manual? Obviously, somebody had made a serious mistake, which some were calling a "wicked falsehood" and others a "text of terror." This was all so tragic. The Church had worked so hard in recent years to correct more than a century of past racist theology. They even held the monumental "Be One" celebration to mark the fortieth anniversary of the revelation extending the priesthood to Black men, and President Nelson himself had personally addressed the NAACP, but now all that painstaking work was rapidly unraveling.

So, what was the Church going to do about it? Surely they would correct it. Surely they would recall all the manuals and destroy them, replacing them with a new corrected version. As I continued reading the articles, however, I was sorely disappointed. No, the Church wasn't going to retract any printed copies. Instead, they simply planned to edit the online version and ask teachers to redirect members to the new, corrected digital edition. After all, most of the members accessed the manuals electronically anyhow, and reprinting the whole manual would be so expensive. Would it really be worth all the trouble?

Well, this may have been good enough for the Church's corporate headquarters, but it was completely unacceptable to me. I wasn't going to be the ward librarian, even the assistant ward librarian, of a library that contained manuals full of egregiously racist doctrines. Something had to be done. Somebody had to fix this, and since it looked like nobody else was going to do anything, I guess that meant that it was all up to me. Again. After all, the manuals were in my library, so I guess that they were my responsibility. Before I could do anything, however, I first had to talk it over with Sister Nelson. She was my presiding authority, after all, so I couldn't just throw out all the brand-new manuals without her permission. But I still wanted to resolve the issue as quickly as possible—preferably before Brother Jones confronted me in the hall—so I arrived at the library fifteen minutes early, offering up a quick prayer before Sister Nelson arrived. I knew that we were dealing with sensitive, even controversial, material, so I wanted to make sure that the Holy Spirit was guiding me to do exactly what the Lord wanted. As soon as Sister Nelson entered the library, however, I immediately accosted her with a flurry of questions about what we were going to do with the new manuals. She, of course, hadn't heard anything about the manuals, so I had to fill her in on what had happened. Then when I asked her what we should do, she simply replied that maybe the Church could just correct the online version.

“Correct the online version?” I protested. “That is what the Church is doing.”

“Great, then that should fix the problem,” she calmly noted.

“Fix the problem?” I practically screamed. “How does that fix anything?”

“Well, then people can look up the manual on their phones and get the updated version,” she answered, unmoved by my outburst.

“But that doesn't fix all the printed copies. The copies in our library. The copies entrusted personally to our care,” I countered.

“Oh, nobody reads those old things anyways,” she pointed out offhandedly.

“Old? They’re not old. They’re brand new. That’s the whole problem,” I complained. Sure, our dusty old copy of *Mormon Doctrine* contains racist doctrines, but it was published in 1958. These *Come, Follow Me* manuals, however, were just published this year, in 2020. We can’t have racist doctrines printed in 2020 in our library.

“Well, what do you want me to do about it?” Sister Nelson patiently asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe we could simply correct the manuals ourselves,” I suggested. “We could start by printing the corrected online version and insert it into the print copies in the library. Then at least the error would be corrected. At least for the copies in our library. At least for the copies that the Lord has entrusted to us personally.”

After Sister Nelson admitted that she saw no reason why we couldn’t do that, I quickly printed up the corrected proofs and carefully taped them into the manuals. That was a great start, but I still worried about all the other manuals that had already been distributed to ward members. Maybe we were only directly, personally responsible for the copies in our own library, but it seemed like nobody else was taking any responsibility for all the other uncorrected copies floating all over the ward. Bishop Oaks certainly hadn’t done anything to correct the error. He wasn’t one for acknowledging that all might not be well in Zion, and the stake president was so busy with the latest drama on the high council that he probably didn’t even know what was happening. Meanwhile, everybody else was acting as if nothing had happened even though we were in the midst of a doctrinal apocalypse. It was like we were living in the pre-1978 Church all over again. Once again, racism was the elephant in the room, but nobody was willing to acknowledge it. Neither the Sunday School teacher nor the Sunday School president had said anything about it in Sunday School, and there had been no mention of it whatsoever in the ward bulletin, so how were ward members even supposed to know about the error, let alone correct it? Sure, it was all over the nether regions of the Mormon blogosphere, but how many ward members really keep up on Religion News Service or Sistas in Zion?

Consequently, I decided that I should contact the elders quorum president, President Johnson, to ask him if he could have all the ministering companionships take a corrected version of the manual to each of their ministering assignments, but he just gave me the cold shoulder. He said that the Church had already corrected the online version, so he didn't think that contacting each family personally was really necessary. Besides, he said that we didn't want to draw too much attention to this issue anyhow. You know, let it calmly die down. He lamely complained that the ministering brethren were busy enough as it was. Busy, my ass. Half the quorum never even visited their assignments, and the other half did little more than take their families a plate of cookies once every three or four months. I should know because as second counselor, I was the one who used to do the ministering interviews myself.

But I could see that I wasn't going to get anywhere with President Johnson, so I approached the Relief Society president, Sister Bell, instead. Maybe the sisters could distribute the corrections if the elders wouldn't, but Sister Bell said that she would have to talk to the bishop first. You know, to make sure that it was okay with her presiding authority. Oh, hell! With all the presiding authorities in this Church, it is amazing that anything ever gets done. Like the bishop was going to do anything about it. Sure, he was busy, but mostly it felt like his only concern was his quarterly report to the stake president. Ministering statistics and Church attendance records were all he cared about. If it wasn't in the report, he never seemed to pay any attention to it. Here I was just trying to magnify my calling, but I was getting stonewalled everywhere I turned.

Having to wait for the bishop one more time, however, was the last straw. If he didn't get back to Sister Bell before the next fast and testimony meeting, I was going to have to take matters into my own hands. What choice did I have? I couldn't let such an egregious mistake just be swept under the rug. I was going to have to just go right up to the pulpit and announce the error to the whole ward and set the record straight

myself. I would have to read the incorrect doctrine as it was originally published, then I would have to read the new corrected online version, and then I would probably also have to throw in a quick sermon about the evils of racism. I wasn't going to recite the entire history of racism in the church going back to Brigham Young, and I was more than willing to forgive the whole situation as an honest mistake. I certainly wasn't going to accuse the present Church leadership of deliberate racism, but I wasn't going to just act like nothing had happened either. I couldn't just let it die out quietly like President Johnson wanted to. No, as a valiant assistant ward librarian, I was going to call a spade a spade and cry repentance like Samuel the Lamanite, insisting that these kinds of racist mistakes were grievous sins and admonishing us all to never repeat them.

By the time fast and testimony meeting finally arrived, Sister Bell still hadn't heard back from the bishop, and President Johnson still refused to budge. The Sunday School teacher and Sunday School president still hadn't made a public announcement, and the ward bulletin remained as silent as ever. In the end, nobody had corrected the error. Nobody had even acknowledged it. The time was well past that somebody had to say something, and it sure looked like nobody else was going to do it. It had only been a scant four years since my last public outburst, so I wasn't looking forward to being the one who had to speak out again, but what choice did I have? I approached the pulpit with trepidation and spoke as I was moved upon by the Holy Spirit. After all, what was Bishop Oaks going to do? Give me a new calling?

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