

A MISSIONARY FAREWELL

Justin Goodson

A crowd of several thousand poured into the Provo Tabernacle. They filled the wooden pews, the kind that are never quite comfortable but perfect for keeping you awake during a sermon. Above the main floor, a balcony wrapped around the perimeter of the long rectangular room. The middle was open from floor to ceiling, just like a concert hall. A hundred missionaries from across Utah Valley sat in front of the crowd on the rostrum. Behind them was the organ. Its gold-colored pipes spanned the back wall, perfectly symmetrical from top to bottom. During the day, sunlight streamed in through the many windows. On this evening in December 1998, generous lighting made the room glow for the missionary Christmas concert. Young missionary Dale Rhodes¹ had organized the event, and he would perform. Aside from Dale and a few others, none of us had any notable musical talent. But in Utah Valley there's no shortage of enthusiasm for Mormon elders and sisters whether they're musical or not, so every seat was occupied.

The journey to this point began months earlier. As Dale bounced around the state of Utah with the typical missionary transfers, he put the program together piece by piece: an elder in the valley, a sister serving in rural central Utah, an ensemble hailing from St. George. This kind of remote coordination is commonplace in our pandemic era. But pre-2000, a time when the world had barely discovered email and more than two decades before Zoom, it was no small task.

On one of those transfers, Dale spent a month with me in Mexican Hat, Utah. We made our home in a trailer next to the tiny LDS church building. The trailer lived up to every stereotype. The furniture was

1. Name has been changed to protect privacy.

old and musty. The potatoes in the kitchen cabinets must have been there for months because the sprouts were a foot tall. The bathroom was scary even when it was clean. The door had hatchet marks from when someone tried to break in. The trailer and the church sat just north of the San Juan River, which marked the border of Navajo Nation. Each day, Dale and I would drive a small red Ford Ranger through the reservation, usually to Monument Valley and surrounding areas. Two twenty-year-old boys with white shirts and ties roaming the desert in a pickup truck was an odd sight, I'm sure.

"It's here!" Dale exclaimed one night when picking up the mail. "I've been waiting for this for weeks!" It was a solo copy of "O Holy Night," which Dale intended to perform months later at the Christmas concert. The arrangement was in the key of D major, which put the climax of the piece on a high A. This was at the very top of Dale's range, and he practiced regularly to keep his vocal cords in shape to reach that note. "Will you accompany me on the piano?" he asked. "President transferred me here so you and I could practice together. He'll transfer you to the valley for the concert."

That was the beginning of my musical relationship with Dale. He sang and I played. We performed most weeks at the Mexican Hat church service. On one Sunday, Dale wanted his solo performance of "How Great Thou Art" to have a gospel-music feel. He asked me to max out the bass on the tiny electric organ. The congregation was a motley crew consisting of a few Native Americans and half a dozen white teachers from the local school. They weren't sure what to think about a short, round missionary belting out "O Lord, my God" while his tall, slender companion treated the organ like a 1980s boombox. Later, at a mission conference with general Church leadership, we performed "O Divine Redeemer." If memory serves, at one point we even slipped in a rendition of "Ave Maria," a piece that at the time sat on the fringe of what was acceptable music for a Mormon chapel.

After our short stint together on the reservation, Dale and I were transferred to separate areas of the mission. He mailed me my own

copy of “O Holy Night.” I practiced it, along with other music for the concert, in Salem, where my new companion and I were stationed. We lived in a small house with a rinky-dink piano in the back storage room. The room wasn’t heated, so I wore gloves when practicing in the winter cold. In hindsight, I’m not sure how that worked. Playing the piano while wearing gloves is just as clumsy as tying your shoes while wearing gloves. Somehow my accompaniments came together.

In the weeks leading up to the concert, Dale ran a rehearsal in the Utah Valley area. In one of our numbers, Dale directed the entire valley’s complement of missionaries as a choir. There were too many cooks in the kitchen, and everyone seemed to have an opinion about pronunciation or dynamics or tempo. The mission president made quick work of our small uprising. “Dale is trained in music. He knows how to do this. We’re going to do what he says.” We did, and Dale made our collection of average voices sound much better than the sum of its parts.

A good performance of “O Holy Night” is like running a five-minute mile. With three verses and three choruses, it’s a high-performance endurance event. Every note is like a measured stride. Each musical phrase is like a bend in the track. Pacing and control are paramount. A strong finish is important too. Just like botching the final lap loses the race, if the ending “power and glory” is off in any way, the whole piece sours. Dale knew this. He had trained and he was ready.

An idea that hatched in a dimly lit trailer in a remote corner of southern Utah culminated in a standing-room-only performance in a glowing Provo Tabernacle. If you’ve ever stared down a crowd of thousands, like Dale did that night, you know something about dread. And if you did it without flinching, like Dale did that night, you know something about composure. From the first note to the last, Dale’s voice commanded attention and created a sense of awe. Each verse grew with intensity, each chorus swelled with emotion. The climactic high note was spot-on. I played as flawlessly as he sang. It was a perfect five minutes. As the sound of the final chord on the piano faded away, Dale didn’t move. The audience was silent. Then, an eruption of applause.

The concert ended with the missionary choir singing “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” On the last verse, Dale turned from directing the choir to face the audience. We all sang together, the choir on the rostrum, those seated on the floor, and those crowded into the balcony. My position was at the pipe organ, where I had literally pulled out all the stops for the final verse. But where I sat didn’t matter because the sound of voices and harmony and music completely consumed the space. For a few brief moments, music made us perfect missionaries. All of us felt the pure message of Jesus.



Dale and I didn’t stay in touch much after our time together as missionaries. By 2009, social media had given us a semblance of reconnection. We exchanged Christmas-card-style updates. Dale was working on an MBA at the University of Utah and his second daughter had just been born. He sent me pictures from his recent visit to Navajo Nation. He was so excited to tell me about a new chapel in Monument Valley and renovations to the chapel in Mexican Hat. Mercifully, the trailer we once lived in was no longer there.

Nine years passed before we corresponded again. This time the message from Dale was much shorter. “Hi” was all he typed. The message wasn’t audible, but its 2-a.m. delivery came with a tone of defeat. Dale was in a rehab facility. We had a long phone call.

I learned that the last decade had served more than its fair share of ups and downs to my former partner in music. Like many who live with bipolar disorder, Dale suffered from deep depression and extreme mood swings. He struggled to hold a job, went through a divorce, came out as gay, and even lived homeless for a year. In August 2018, six months after our phone call, Dale celebrated one year of sobriety, a major milestone in his road to recovery from alcohol and drug addiction. Two years later, Dale celebrated his three-year anniversary. As far as I know, Dale walked the difficult path of sobriety all the way to his passing in 2021.

You can't visit the Provo Tabernacle anymore. At least not how it was when we performed there in 1998. The tabernacle stood from the late 1800s, when it was built by Mormon pioneers, through to 2010, when it was destroyed by a blaze. Some might look at Dale's life and see that fire-ravaged building. They see an interior ruined by the flames of choice and circumstance. They see something that was once beautiful but that ultimately toppled, leaving only a burned-out shell of a man. "Dale was great," they say. "But he made mistakes. He knew the gospel was true and didn't live up to it. He wasn't in good standing with the Church."

Aside from being narrow-minded, in my experience, these same people often fail to understand that the person who overdoses and the person who manages to live up to a strict set of rules may be committing the same sin. They may both avoid life, one by indulging passion and the other by purging it. Neither lives life, and that is a sort of death. It's true that Dale crashed and burned over and over again. But stopping his story at one of these low points ignores so much of the living he did in between. At times Dale had all the appearances of a sturdy structure, and at other times he literally lived among ashes. His efforts to build up again are just as important as the downward spiral.

Dale wore many hats across his various endeavors. Before he was a missionary, Dale ran his own lawn care business. He was proud to have earned enough money to buy a Ford F-150, the workhorse of his first career. Years later, Dale worked in the financial services industry but eventually left after becoming disenchanted with greedy big banks. Dale's vocal training came in handy as an unlikely bounty hunter. When he rang the doorbell at a fugitive's home, he would belt out, "Papa John's delivery! Better ingredients! Better pizza!" Apparently, this line always opened the door. Maybe we should have tried that when tracting as missionaries. Dale taught voice lessons and performed in operas. He was even a member of the world-famous Mormon Tabernacle Choir. After being laid off in the middle of the pandemic, Dale turned to more artistic endeavors. He made memory quilts. Send him your T-shirts

and Dale would turn them into a quilt. He even launched a podcast. With his typical humor, Dale's podcast discussed the ins and outs of making a living, something he had a lot of experience with. The last time I spoke with Dale was as a guest on the second episode. Dale's final entrepreneurial endeavor was as a voice artist. Just before his passing, he wrote and recorded a short story. Dale wasn't flighty or fickle. He was king of the side hustle. He lived.

An analogy between the Provo Tabernacle and the life of Dale Rhodes should include what happened after the fire. Following more than five years of reconstruction, the tabernacle opened its doors again in 2016, this time as a Mormon temple. It no longer plays host to missionary choirs. The uncomfortable wooden pews have been replaced by upholstery. The exterior looks like the old tabernacle, but the interior has been completely redesigned. The building serves a different function and sometimes a different audience, but it still has tremendous value to those who use it.

The man who passed away looked a lot like the missionary I met in 1998, just older. I couldn't see it by looking at him, but Dale's insides had been yanked out and put back together. This new man wasn't designed by architects nor built with premium materials, but he had been painstakingly reassembled, piece by piece, just like the Provo Tabernacle. In both cases, what appeared outwardly unchanged was inwardly altered beyond recognition. Mental illness, addiction, love, loss, coming to terms with your sexuality—these things change a man. These things are living, and living changes us. Without its fiery demise, the Provo Tabernacle wouldn't be what it is today. And without what it is today, the tabernacle's story wouldn't be complete. Life is the same way, mine and yours and Dale's. Living includes the falling down as well as the getting up.

Not many people speak at their own funeral, much less sing at it. In December 2021, twenty-three years after Dale's performance in the Provo Tabernacle, a recording of Dale singing "O Holy Night" concluded his own memorial service. From a small stereo in a nondescript Salt Lake

City church building, Dale made his final performance. Another perfect five minutes passed. This time there was no applause, only silence.

My favorite lines from “O Holy Night” are these:

Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till he appear'd, and the soul felt its worth.

...

In all our trials born to be our friend;

...

He knows our need,
To our weakness no stranger;

...

Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is Love and His Gospel is Peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
And in His name all oppression shall cease.

The miracle of Jesus is not that he somehow saved us from weakness or triumphantly stamped out oppression. The miracle is seeing the worth of a soul despite its shortcomings. The miracle is realizing that all we can really do for another person is love them. A celebration of Dale's life landscape doesn't require that we look down at the valleys with judgement or up at the mountains with admiration. It only requires that we close our eyes and appreciate the entire terrain. When I close my eyes, I see my companion, my friend. I hear his music. It's fast and then it's slow. It's joyful and then it's hopeless. It's silly and then it's serious. It's breaking and then it's healing. It's always full of life. I love you, brother. Until we meet again.

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