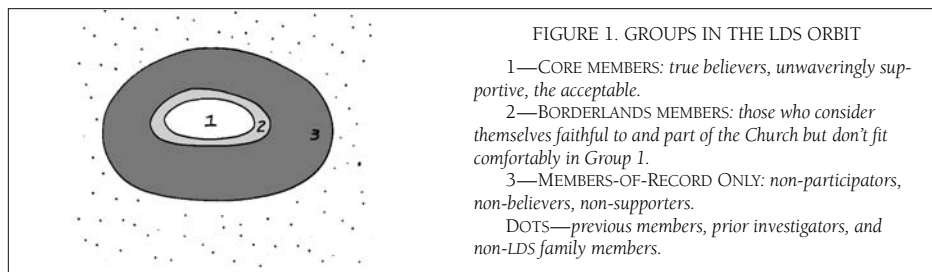


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

A BORDERLAND STORY AND SURVEY

By D. Jeff Burton



I RECENTLY EXCHANGED emails with a young woman, Kristen (name changed), struggling with typical Borderland family and activity issues.¹ At the end of this exchange of messages, she asks a couple of questions that **she would like readers to respond to.**

KRISTEN: I have been reading your Borderlands column online and have listened to past Sunstone symposium talks that you have given. I am writing first to thank you and Sunstone for what you do, and second, because I need some support with a crucial decision.

I'm 31 years old, grew up in Orem "on the track"—temple marriage and the whole nine yards. We have three children, ages seven, six, and four. My doubts began with the temple ceremony nine years ago, and try as I might, I have been unable to make peace with it and other issues. I tried putting it all "on the shelf," but about two years ago, the shelf broke. My husband and I went through the awful experience of learning many of the details about Church history and experienced the all-too-common "devastation." The good news is that we were united in our experiences and decisions. (I have heard the horror stories of fractured marriages over these issues.)

About a year and a half ago, we decided that we had to find out if there was another way that brought more peace of mind. So we stepped away from the LDS Church. I think "stepped away" is the best term, because nothing was done in anger or in a huff. We did not have our names removed. In fact we love our ward members dearly. I miss the

community. We were just honestly seeking peace in our spiritual lives. We have been attending a Methodist church near our home. The people there are also wonderful. And yet I feel like a magnet is pulling me back to my Mormon roots. I feel like I'm wading upstream constantly fighting this feeling I have that I'm supposed to go back to being a Mormon.

I know that you don't have hard numbers that you can share with me, but anecdotally speaking (I'm assuming that you have contact with many people in our predicament), do you find that more have found peace staying inside the Mormon Church than when they step outside it?

Also, is there a way to go back and be peaceful? Can I just politely excuse myself at those moments when my head feels like it will explode listening to a "TBM" (True Believing Mormon) go on and on? I've always felt guilty if I wasn't attending all my meetings. Can I go back and be a little more choosy? I am not asking that you make any decisions for me. I am asking for your insight and experience with this situation.

I feel the urge to attend my old ward this coming Sunday. So that is what I plan to do. We aren't going to bring the kids with us—it has been too much of a rollercoaster ride for them already. I need clarity before we make another drastic change. This has all been rough.

JEFF: Thanks for sharing your interesting story and questions. I spoke with my wife Marlene, and we have some thoughts for your consideration:

- Your "stepping away" experience is not

unusual except that most people just leave for good. Congratulations on sticking around long enough to explore what impact such major changes might have on you, your husband, your children, and others.

- You are fortunate to have a "soul mate" for a spouse. Many other couples grappling with these issues have had a lot of trouble because they didn't see eye to eye. We hope that, as you are doing now, anything you do in the future will continue to be coordinated with your husband such that both of you have negotiated an acceptable "deal."

- It has been possible for many people to find some way to stay connected and involved at the ward level (and beyond), but the ways and means vary from person to person.

- Motives for church activity vary widely, even among the "TBMs"—and these motives aren't often spoken except for the presenting reasons: "the Church is true," "we're commanded to be active," "I don't want my kids to be outsiders." If you could get into the hearts and minds of your fellow ward members, you would be surprised (and relieved!) to know that many of them are struggling with various issues not known to other ward members. But they stay active.

- Any honest effort on your part to be involved, helpful, and part of the main ward group is certainly acceptable.

- What never works in a healthy way is dishonesty—e.g., pretending to be a TBM, lying to get a temple recommend. What you decide to divulge (in being up-front and open about your "faith journey" with other ward members) is up to you, but "honesty is the best policy" in the long run. You'll likely find a few with whom you can share your feelings and beliefs, and vice versa. Once people trust that they can open up with you, you may find lots of people wanting to talk to you.

- As for your kids, they can be involved with you, and you can be honest with them about why you're all going—e.g., to be part of the group, to learn Christian principles, to get the benefits of Scouting, because it's our tradition, or because it makes me feel good.

- Maybe you should explore your ideas with the bishop or Relief Society president to see if they would support your being involved even if you're a Borderlander.

- Be tactful with members. Don't try to convince them "why the history is wrong," "why I don't believe." You can upset and alienate them, not to mention pushing them off the fine wire they themselves may be teetering on. Each person should be allowed his or her own journey.

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• You can be a fine follower of Jesus (or just a good, loving, honest person) as a Mormon just as easily as not. The pressures, pro and con, are there in any setting, including at the ward.

KRISTEN: Jeff and Marlene, thank you for sharing your thoughts. I think the best part of this experience, and I suppose why it needed to happen, is because of the increased belief we have that God stays with his children no matter where they choose to worship. His presence has been in our home. He has not left us. We did, unfortunately, have the fear-mongering brand of Mormon warn us that we are currently under Satan's control because we aren't going to church. I know now (from experience) that that is not correct. I think the gift of this whole experience is that I am no longer ruled by fear—the fear that if I didn't take every last word of the Church literally we would be doomed. It doesn't have that hold on me anymore.

Thank you for letting me share this with you. I guess my bottom-line questions for you are these: Has it been worth it for you? Do you regret your decision to make your way within Mormonism? What about our children? That is of primary concern at this time for me. If you were at the crossroads again, would you still choose the Mormon path? I'm at the crossroads.

I don't want to do anything rash (as I mentioned, our kids don't need any more hopping around). Tomorrow is Sunday, and my husband and I plan to attend sacrament meeting together and leave the kids home. We'll hopefully continue to navigate the waters together.

JEFF: Thanks for the detailed message. It is good that you and your husband are united on this. As for your questions, here are some thoughts

Has it been worth it for you? It has been for us. If I (Jeff) had pretended to be a TBM, I might have been a bishop. I was headed in that direction, having served as counselor in two bishoprics, on the high council, and as a branch president. And one could justify that secret dishonesty by saying, "I can do so much good as bishop." But the honesty path, while keeping me from leadership positions in the Church, has opened up many gratifying doors and experiences—e.g., my experiences on the SUNSTONE board, being able to talk to and get to know people like you, and so forth. And I feel good about it. I can look anyone in the eye and say, "This is me."

What about our children? There is a definite benefit to having kids walk a narrow path

like the one provided for active LDS kids. They don't get into trouble as easily as other kids do, but I also believe that in many cases, they don't excel or become as creative as they could be given a broader education and experience. I will expand on this most important question when I have a little more time and can get some additional information about your kids.

If you were at the crossroads again, would you still choose the Mormon path? I would still choose the Mormon path. But everyone is different, and I have known members who have chosen to leave, and they have done very well. It has to be your personal decision. I think you need to listen to yourself very closely, give the issue some prayer, weigh the options, talk with your husband and significant others, and make "crossroads" decisions that work best for you and your family.

You can change your mind, whatever you decide to do, if you leave that door open—don't burn bridges, and don't destroy current relationships.

KRISTEN [writing shortly after attending church]: Thank you, once again, for the thoughtful response. We went to church on Sunday. I went to Relief Society, then went home during Sunday School. (I didn't want to shock my system too much!) I returned with my husband and went to sacrament meeting. It was the Primary program, and it was lovely. Nothing earth-shattering happened either positively or negatively, which is a good thing. At one point, my husband leaned over and said, "This all feels very familiar." I asked him if he meant that in a positive way, and he replied, "Not really." He had meant that it felt *long*, just like it used to!

I have no explanation for the peaceful feeling that I have right now. I don't have any more clarity about my "pet issues" (Church history, temple worship, priesthood, garments), but I feel like God is giving me a reprieve from wrangling with it. And it's so nice. God has answered my prayer, I suppose, in an unexpected way. My feeling is that we need to find a place within Mormonism if it's okay that I'm not a hardliner/true believer. The next hurdle is deciding what to do next Sunday!

The eyes of my second and third children lit up when they saw we'd gone back to church last Sunday. They want to go to Primary. They like it. Their friends are there. My oldest child (the one who seems the least interested in going back) will turn eight next January. Can you see where I'm heading with this? The baptism question.

At this point, we feel that eight is young,

and frankly, it's a lot to ask of a kid to commit to a spiritual path at such a young age. On the other hand, these days I view baptism as simply a ritual, a rite of passage where a child is welcomed into a spiritual community. So another question: Do we take a hardliner stance and make him wait while every other kid in his class is already baptized? Right now, our plan is to wait to see how he feels about it. He might not want to at this point.

I think my favorite part of your response is when you said you can look anyone in the eye and say, "This is me." As I look back on this experience—as confusing and heart-breaking as it has been for others, my parents in particular—it was necessary. This is *my* journey. This is *my* experience. And this is *ME!* <grin>

Since going to church last Sunday, I have already received, as you suggested I might, a call from a former visiting teacher who confided in me that for most of her married life, she has been on the brink of doing the same thing that we did. I have a feeling her call will not be the last.

JEFF: The children/church issue is a knotty one. One family I know simply took their kids to church every week and let them go the full distance. These parents didn't tell their kids the way they truly felt or believed. One of the kids is now a "true believer" and openly worries about her parents "going to hell," not coming to temple weddings, and so forth. The other appears to be a skeptic. They're both good kids, however, now in high school. So that's one parental approach—staying in the closet. That approach is very common and can work, but it can also backfire.

All parents have to be judicious in what they let their kids know and when to tell them. We're all in the closet to some degree when it comes to our younger kids.

A family I have written about in a previous column took their kids to church with them but then talked with them afterward to "correct" or give a more complete explanation of any misinformation the kids happened to pick up—e.g., "other churches are evil" or "the Jews killed Christ." They also worked to expand their religious teachings so that the children fully realized that Jesus-based behaviors are more important, for example, than "attending church every Sunday." This family was open with their kids, and things seem to be okay (their children are approaching high school and college age). At least one of the children has come to view the gospel just like his parents do.

Another approach is to let the kids decide

for themselves all the way, every time. If they want to go to church, then help them, go with them, and support them in all ways. Same with those who want to do something else or who just don't want any religion.

With any approach, we must take responsibility for our kids' religious, moral, and ethical training and their behaviors and attitudes: "moral home schooling." Most Mormons let the Church be the only teacher of "religion" to their kids, which is an easy way out of an important responsibility. Sometimes that approach backfires, too. You get a few robots that way, as well.

Whatever course we choose, we must always be prepared for the unknown, the surprising, and the unexpected.

My basic thinking is this: If the Church has something important and useful to offer, then children and adults will willingly attend and participate. Sometimes I think the Church should be required to rise or fall on its own merits (within reason, of course). The attitude that we often encounter in local wards that "this is the true Church, so we'd better support it or else" just won't cut it in today's world.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to designate a single "solution" to this quandary of "children and the Church." Each child is unique and must be handled differently. The "one child/one program" approach seems best, but it does require extra effort on the part of parents.

KRISTEN [about a month later]: I wanted to check in and let you know the latest and greatest on our journey. We have been attending our ward for the last four weeks, and things are going well. The Relief Society has already plugged me in on the piano for the entertainment portion of the Christmas party. It's like we never left—which I say with much gratitude and appreciation for a wonderfully accepting and loving ward. My husband has decided that priesthood meeting and Sunday School are not his thing right now, so we all get dressed up, drive over together and drop the kids at Primary. I go to my meetings, and he goes back home and has his own quiet communion with God before returning for sacrament meeting. It's a good system so far.

The bishop has been over for a visit, inquiring about our status. We were always pretty open with him about our issues. At times, it felt like his questions were a bit loaded—as if he were hoping for a tearful confession about how "all else pales in comparison to the one true Church." He asked "So, what was your experience like at the

other church you were attending?" I figured it was my time to make a plug for a more Christ-centered focus in LDS meetings, so that was the drum I beat in my response to him. It was all very friendly and done in love on both sides.

Our oldest turns eight soon. We've made it clear that baptism is not out of the question, but also not necessarily happening during his birth month. I still have mixed feelings about it. On one hand, I can view it simply as a way for my son to commit to a relationship with Jesus Christ, following his example of being baptized, and so forth. Yet, the emphasis from the Church can be weighted so heavily on becoming "a member of the one true Church" that it makes the issue more complicated in my mind. What to do?

All in all, I would say the transition back to having an association with the Church has been a good one. Perhaps you can ask SUNSTONE readers to comment on my main questions:

1. What is the best approach for children?
2. How should we deal with the baptism issue?

OKAY, READERS. Please email me with some good advice for Kristen and her family.

AT this year's Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium, forty-five attendees responded to an informal survey I passed out during the session about Borderlander experiences. I didn't do a statistical analysis of the data, but I've summarized below some obvious trends and interesting outcomes. If you're interested in exploring the results in more depth, the raw data is available for you to explore on the Sunstone website at SUNSTONEONLINE.COM/EXTRAS.

SURVEY RESULTS

- Two-thirds of those who responded considered themselves to be in the "Borderlands" as we have defined it for this column. Does this percentage hold true for SUNSTONE subscribers? I'm very interested in hearing your thoughts on this. My contact information is at the end of the column.

- The majority of "problems and issues" that led to respondents feeling they were in the Borderlands (or beyond) were related directly to the Church in contrast to more general religious issues such as their beliefs about Jesus or God. Three-quarters of respondents listed having issues with Joseph

Smith's history or behavior; more than half with the Book of Mormon; and nearly half with Church leadership structure and practices. Struggles with the temple followed closely behind, and "authority" and "feminist" issues were also high on the list, with many more women than men listing these as problematic for them.

- A large percentage of respondents reported still being "in the closet" about their problems and issues. Only about half had told their spouses everything they were struggling with. When queried about whether they had shared their concerns with friends, children, or parents, the number of affirmative responses dropped off dramatically. Fewer than a tenth of respondents had shared anything with their bishop or fellow ward members. These responses suggest that the phenomenon of the "closet doubter," which I wrote about twenty-five years ago, is as real today as it was then.²

For nearly half of the respondents, their entrance into the LDS Borderlands had begun in their mid-twenties to late thirties. Another thirty percent reported that it had been in their forties and fifties when the problems and issues surfaced in such a way that they could no longer be ignored.

When asked about how they deal with being honest and open about their issues with the Church, more than half of the respondents selected, "I am trying to be open and honest," with the remainder struggling to find a way to be open within our current LDS culture and climate.

Presented with a list of motives, more than 40 percent of respondents who claim Borderlander status checked that they have chosen to attend church and maintain activity because of family ties or because they "like it" and feel it is the "right thing to do." Another third reported their wanting to maintain "membership" in a familiar ward group as another reason for keeping them connected with the Church, even if in the Borderlands. Fewer, but still a significant number, reported that they've maintained ties because of "fear or hope," for reasons related to their job or profession, or to hopefully have influence in changing the Church.

I was interested to learn that fewer than half of respondents had ever sought "help" in understanding or coping with their Borderlander status. Of those who said yes, 60 percent reported that they'd consulted spouses, parents, or other family members; nearly that many had sought help from friends; and just over a third had spoken about it with professional counselors. Only 15 percent had turned to LDS officials or

leaders for guidance.

Three-fourths of respondents were older than forty years of age, and nearly 40 percent were sixty or older. Only one respondent was under twenty-five. A substantial number of respondents reported strong church activity, holding temple recommends, and obeying the Word of Wisdom.

BOTH Kristen's experience and the survey results suggest that we still have a long way to go before Borderland members who are willing to be both honest and faithful can feel fully accepted in the Church. **May this column, along with more of us sharing our journeys with family and leaders in a way similar to how Kristen and her husband have done, help speed the day when faith in all its forms are honored and welcomed within the LDS tent.**

NOTES

*Please send me any of your experiences
from life in the Borderlands.
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1. In my first column (this is the twenty-seventh), I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life, a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief and testimony, a different view of LDS history, some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church, reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See the figure. Copies of former columns are available on the *For Those Who Wonder* website, WWW.FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.

2. Please see my book, *For Those Who Wonder*, for a copy of the essay which was originally published in the September-October 1982 *SUNSTONE*. A free download of this book is also available at WWW.FORTHOSEWHOWONDER.COM.