

Experiences of a Borderland Bishop

In this column I report the communications between me and "Bishop Thomas," currently the bishop of a large ward not located in Utah. (Names and some details have been changed to protect identities.) I've communicated with "Borderland" bishops in the past but this is the first time any bishop has agreed to share his story.

Bishop Thomas: I finished your book last night. I downloaded it after listening to your interview on the Mormon Matters podcast. [Footnote 1]. I really like what you said in your book. I'm currently serving as a bishop, approaching my third year. I'm happy to report that thanks to you, *Sunstone*, *Mormon Stories*, and others, I have been able to learn more about the belief/faith crisis trend we (i.e., the Church and its members) are experiencing now.

To tell you the truth, I fit the description of a Borderlander, but I've never thought of myself as such, or even as a "faithful doubter." I have experienced pretty much everything you have mentioned in your book without putting a name to it. And I've never had a problem fitting into the church with all my 'doubts' and 'rejections' of some of the tenets of the church. But in a miraculous way I came across *Mormon Stories* and *Sunstone* about three years ago, just before I got called as a bishop. (I have no doubt that the Lord guided me to you all to prepare me for this calling).

Right after I became the bishop I sat down with the former bishop to go over the ward's issues/problems. We started with the smaller problems, e.g., janitorial service issues, Sunday School attendance. After about an hour, he said, "Now let's talk about the most difficult problem in the ward. It's about some of our brethren." When he said that, I prepared myself for the worst. Had these brethren committed adultery? Fraud? What horrible things?

Then he said, "Several of our best brethren have lost faith in the church and have serious doubts on its past history and teachings" (One of these brethren served as a bishop in the past.)

I was still waiting to hear the 'big problems,' so I asked, "That's it? Is there anything else we need to know about these brothers?" "No. That's all. The stake president knows about their "problems" and we don't know what to do to help them. But we need to keep an eye on these brethren."

I wanted to scream, "Wow, no problem! I know exactly what to do with them!"

I soon met with them individually and asked about their belief issues and what they struggled with. Some of these brethren had learned many of the issues Borderlanders face. Most of this new knowledge came to them through the Internet and some books they had read.

So I started a "Sustaining Your Faith" class for these brethren, once a month, with me being the discussion leader. No one in the Ward knew much about it at the time

(I think). For several months we held this little class. In the first few classes I listened to all their struggles/questions/doubts. As I listened to them, I realized that their doubts were genuine and sincere. These were good and well educated men who wanted to understand all these controversial issues but they didn't know where and to whom to turn for help.

Meeting with these brethren made me realize that the Lord was aware of the issues you have been talking about for over thirty years, and that I believe He is moving His work toward that direction you envisioned many years ago. Thanks to people like you and John Dehlin, the work of rescuing is actually working for many of these folks who are struggling to remain in the church without having to accept everything. I look forward to the day when we'll start having leadership trainings focused on these issues without being judgmental. Thank you. I was also inspired by John Dehlin's experience about how his stake President's love once helped him return to full activity in the Church.

Jeff: Your experiences are very interesting and informative. You might be the ideal "successful Borderlander." Would you be willing to let me put some of your story into the Borderlands column? I'm sure your story and your approaches would offer much hope and help to those who are struggling through the various stages of the phenomenon. I've attached a questionnaire we often use. You don't need to go into great detail but knowing your history will help me to formulate other questions and help us all better understand you.

Bishop Thomas: Sure. You can use my story but let's keep my ID a secret. The last thing I want is for some narrowed-minded leader to remove me from my calling and thus cut short my chances to rescue other people in my ward who may be going through a faith crisis.

Just to start, I'm 57 years old and hold a BA and a Master degree in special education. I'm the CEO of an educational company specializing in providing linguistic training. I'm married to a great woman I met in college. We have three grown sons.

1-- How would you describe your upbringing in the Church?

My parents were members. My father served as a branch president. They both were liberal members. They never "required" any of us in the family to be baptized at age 8, for example. Their approach was to let us decide on our own when we wanted to join the church and how to participate. For this reason I never become fully involved in the Church until my early teens. After serving a mission in [a foreign country], I attended college. While there, I served in a large ward as a counselor in the bishopric. It was during this time that I began questioning some of the things the church was doing which I did not fully agree with. So, if I were to pinpoint the time I became a Borderlander it would probably be around this time, when I was 22-23 years old.

2-- What issues, events, actions or concerns caused you to move into the "Borderlands?"

Some of the issues I struggled with included the different versions of the First Vision, polygamy, priesthood and the blacks, women not being allowed to serve in bishoprics, and a few other church policies.

My current issue is: Why are we having a PEC meeting with only the 'men' leaders meeting to discussing the welfare of the ward? Why isn't the Relief Society President ALWAYS involved in this meeting? Can we really help solve our ward members' issues without the valuable inputs from the RSP? If we – priesthood leaders—are to help families, we need to involve our RSP who understands better the mothers of our families. I love President's Packer's statement when he said that if we neglect involving the sisters more, we loose great power in the priesthood (something like that).

3. -- Why do you stay in the "Borderlands?"

While I do not 'believe' nor agree with every teaching and policy in the church, I do realize that the Church has the answers to my most important questions. Most importantly, the Church provides me with endless opportunities to serve others in a most efficient manner. Its family oriented-teachings and values are just priceless. I really feel I can serve the Lord more and do more for Him through this church than through any others (I have visited and studied many churches throughout my life).

4. What group (of the three-stage model) do you consider yourself mostly in now?

Probably the same as you, in Group 2, because everything I've heard you say or write, I can relate to.

5-- How has this situation affected you emotionally, spiritually and/or physically?

No negative effects at all. My wife knows about my doubts but she also knows my passion and love for the Lord and the church itself. I support and love our church leaders who to me are among the finest men on earth just trying to do their very best to follow the Lord's example to bless those in needs. I had already made up my mind many years ago that although I believe our modern prophets were and are called of God, they were not nor are they free from making mistakes and even being bias in some of the things they do. I also believe that God does call other of his children to represent him and serve him through other churches. God works through many leaders but he can only have one man at a time running his main ship. (There will always be that one particular ship that stands out among all other ships, and it can only be driven by one captain at a time.)

6-- How have you coped with the issues, events, concerns and/or status you've experienced?

They've never really bothered me because I believe that God reaches out to his children through many ways and people. Church leaders are human beings with weaknesses, so I'm ok with the idea that they occasionally teach their 'opinions' rather than always teaching the Lord's mind. I also believe that the atonement of Christ

covers all those mistakes made by his servants, both in and of the church. If the Lord has already paid the full price for those mistakes, then why should I make a big deal out of it? He is the one choosing his leaders, so I leave it to him to deal with them and the results of their actions and teachings.

7-- How well do you cope?

I think relatively well. I'm very happy as a member of the church. I regularly attend the temple and have always enjoyed attending my church meetings. I love the opportunities the church provides to meet and make new friends from all over the world. It is a great social network.

8a. -- How open and honest are you with others about your Borderland status?

I abide by what President Kimball once said that some truths are best left unsaid. At this time, I can't be open with all my disagreements because it would create unnecessary conflicts with some members who are not ready yet to face these issues. And the last thing I want is for anyone to sacrifice all the good and great teachings and goodness the church bring into our lives over some controversial details or facts.

8b. If you have kept it a secret, please explain why you felt a need to do that.

I do it to keep peace and harmony with friends and family. There is no price too high to pay for peace within the home and among friends. In other words, I choose to put on the side the controversial facts – without denying them – and to focus on those many other facts that promote love and peace.

8c. What would it take for you to be honest and open with others?

I'll open up when the day comes the leaders of the Church no longer view members' struggles with controversial issues or facts as a faith problem issue. These are realities they should no longer avoid or view them as problems. There is no need to panic or try to 'rescue' or save someone from having questions and doubts. Borderlanders should not be viewed as a 'faith problem' that has to be solved through a program to reinforce his or her testimony. The controversial historical facts of the church will remain. They are not going to change.

9-- How has this Borderlands experience impacted your spouse, children, parents and/or friends?

So far, there have been no negative effects. The gospel is an integral part of our family life. My wife and children know I have a passion for the Lord and love to serve him. We do all those spiritual activities which I believe have blessed our families over the years (daily family prayers, scriptures study, family home evening, attending church meetings and the temple etc...).

10-- How have various people responded to you and your

experiences?

As I said, they don't know much about my disagreements but our ward members seem to be enjoying the changes I'm making in our ward. They simply don't know that many of these changes come from suggestions made by people like you and John Dehlin and other people John had interviewed.

Jeff: Thanks for letting us get to know you better. Can you describe any of the changes you've made as a bishop that relates to the Borderland theme?

Bishop Thomas: I once heard someone John Dehlin interviewed who said that changes must be made at the local level. Local leaders, especially bishops, should take the initiative to make our sacrament meetings more focused on Jesus rather than the tenets of the restoration, e.g., the First Vision, the Word of Wisdom etc. So one thing I've done is to make all our sacrament themes throughout the year based on Jesus and Christ. The themes are also general enough that other Christians and non-members can feel comfortable with them. Here are some examples of our themes: Worshiping Christ through music (non-members may not understand the word hymns). Jesus Christ, the Son of God; Hearing the Voice of Jesus in Your Daily Life, etc...

Here's one specific experience: I had an "interview" with a brilliant young man attending [a prestigious university]. I began asking him some questions and he began opening up. One thing he said was that he had been struggling for many years with the way members bear their testimonies. I couldn't understand why members would always say that they 'knew' the church was true. He told me he would occasionally ask someone, "What is it that it is *true* to you?" In other words he wanted to know how the fact they 'knew the church was true' translated into their daily actions and activities.

I told him that the way I look at it is that the church could be 'true' to whoever wanted or needed that 'testimony.' I also told him that I believe that other churches are 'as true to their members as our church is true to us'. I explained that I strongly believe that God works through other churches as well to bless the lives of his children. As I said these things, this young man kept smiling and said, "This is exactly what I think, too." I told him that Mormonism is not meant for everybody. But for us who have embraced this religion, our duty is to get the best out of what the church offers us and to try serve Christ the best we can through this religion and church. This wonderful young man said that he felt so relieved to hear those things because that's exactly what he had always believed.

Jeff: Wow! That is a very unusual story, but I know it must happen behind closed doors in many a Bishop's office, but we rarely get to hear about it.

Bishop Thomas: What I would like to know though, is how many more people there are in our ward who are struggling with these issues and are unnecessarily suffering because they don't know what to do or who to talk to?

Jeff: I imagine there are many others. And as the word

spreads that you're an understanding and helpful bishop on these issues, more will come out of the closet, and you'll be there to help them. Any other changes to relate?

Bishop Thomas: I hold a 'testimony/speech' training class to train members to speak and bear their testimonies better. I teach them to avoid sharing their testimonies on things that non-members may not understand or even believe. I've also tried to teach the members to follow our modern day prophets' style in the way the finish their talks – rather than to say 'I know the church is true. I know the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith is true etc...' - I show them the most frequently pattern used by our leaders in general conferences – the 'prayer' pattern. This pattern consists in ending a talk with a prayer such as 'I pray that we may have the courage to follow Jesus Christ by....' or 'it is my prayer that we all recommit ourselves to follow Christ...'

I also challenged our ward members to read more regularly the New Testament. I quoted President Hinckley who once said that if he were a bishop or stake president, one thing he would do is to encourage his members to read the New Testament. So I challenged the members to do that. A few months later a sister told me that since she took up the challenge to spend more time reading the New Testament, her faith in Christ had increased. She said that for years she had focused on reading the Book of Mormon only, but now since she started reading the NT, her love for Christ has increased.

I truly believe that the Gospel found in the New Testament is the Gospel of the Good News. It is our job, as leaders, to make sure that we present these 'Good News' as such to our members. It is the Good News for everybody, faithful, unfaithful, doubters, no doubters, straight or gay. We need to learn to enjoy our 'mortal journey' the best we can – together as friends, brothers and sisters with all our weaknesses and strengths.

Jeff: Thanks so much for sharing your experiences! We can only hope that other Bishops are inspired to serve as you do.

A final thought for closing this column: Any Stake Presidents out there ready to come out of the closet?

Footnote 1. In my first column (this is Column 51), 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.

My book, *For Those Who Wonder*, and all of the Borderland columns are available for free download at: www.forthosewhowonder.com. Two recent podcasts I participated in can be accessed at: <http://exploringsainthood.org/031-jeff-burton/> and <http://mormonmatters.org/2013/10/21/199-untangling-faith-belief-and-the-expectation-to-know/>

