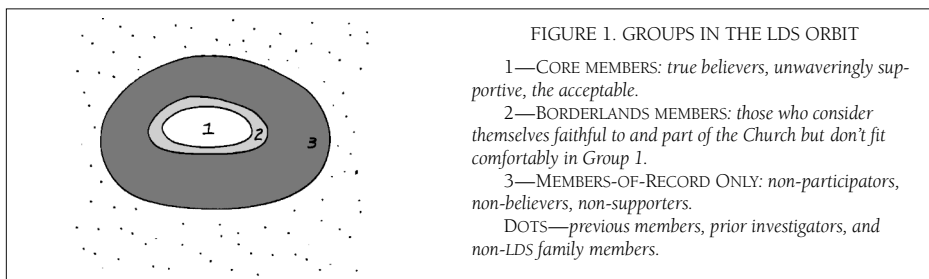


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

IDENTIFYING AND WORKING
WITH ADOLESCENT
BORDERLANDERS

by D. Jeff Burton



ADOLESCENTS HAVE OCCASIONALLY been discussed in this column, usually as innocent bystanders as their parents enter the Borderlands. I've sometimes provided suggestions about how to protect them, shield them, guide them, and so forth. However, we haven't discussed children or teens who become closet doubters or Borderlanders themselves.¹ I have run across only a few minors who openly identify as Borderlanders, and only one has contacted me directly through SUNSTONE.

Recently, I was asked by a deacons quorum advisor in our stake to come to a Sunday meeting and describe my mission experience to the boys. Apparently, one of the deacons had told his mother that he no longer believes in the Church and therefore doesn't want to go on a mission. This was the first she had heard of his thinking, and she quickly let the "proper authorities" know about the situation. The deacons quorum advisor, knowing of my Borderland status and the fact that I had experienced a successful mission, felt that I could persuade the boy and any other doubters that a mission could still be an option.

I went to the boys' meeting with a Japanese sword and some tasty Japanese finger foods (just what 12- to 14-year-old boys like) and told them about my 19-year-old self being called into my bishop's office,

my reluctance to go on a mission, my problems with testimony, the bishop arranging for me to go to Japan, my work there, how much I enjoyed it, how I was able to get around my status as a non-testimony bearer, and so forth. I explained that non-proselyting missions are available, such as those with the Church's Humanitarian Center. Several boys showed interest in my presentation,² but I never quite figured out who the Borderland suspect was.

This episode reminded me that I, too, had been a closet doubter and Borderlander as an adolescent; why would it be any different for some of today's youth? Especially since the internet provides much more information to young people than I had access to; it's possible that there are even more youthful closet doubters and Borderlanders than there were when I was growing up. Indeed, the Church has acknowledged a great loss of young people in recent years. What are the demographics of this "lost group"? What are the main causes of these losses? What steps are being taken to change this situation? For those of us in the Borderlands, what should we be doing about our younger children? Should we, for example, be more open, possibly even encouraging our kids to move into the Borderlands with us? How can we get our kids to own up to their true thoughts and beliefs? Does our secretiveness about our

own Borderland status adversely affect them?

If you have any experiences or knowledge that could shed light on some of these questions, please write to me so that I can share them in this column.³ Perhaps you have other questions that I haven't thought of. Or maybe you found constructive approaches to dealing with Borderland or closet-doubter youth.

Searching my files for stories and experiences that relate to this issue, I actually found a few that hadn't caught my full attention when I first received them. (Note: Names and some details have been changed for clarity and to protect identities.)

Kenny, who corresponded with me about five years ago, has observations that are certainly relevant to this topic:

I am 36 years old, the father of two children, and a typical fully-in-the-closet Borderlander. (My wife is my only confidant, and even she doesn't know everything.) I believe in most Church teachings, certainly the Jesus-centered ones, but I don't believe in many Mormon traditions, claims, and stories. Fortunately, I'm not bitter about my status, nor do I think the Church is out to fool us. But I worry about my kids.

I still think my children need a stable religious upbringing, regardless of where that may occur. Mormonism is an all-encompassing lifestyle that can lead children to be upstanding, moral, and honest citizens. We have dedicated leaders who have taught good, ethical ideas to my children by "word and deed." The Scouting and Young Women's programs are quite good when co-managed by parents. I have encouraged my children to participate fully in the Church's programs, and I have seen positive outcomes so far. I struggle to manage (for them and for me) the differences I see in Jesus' good and wholesome teachings and what the kids are sometimes taught in Primary. Parental involvement is the key if we want to steer our kids toward what is right and good and away from narrower teachings that distract them from moral and ethical behaviors.

As for my involvement with my children at church, although I am not a temple recommend holder, I have baptized and confirmed both of them. I feel I honor my priesthood through my daily actions and behaviors, which I feel justifies my "worthiness" to perform these ordinances. Baptism is a rite of passage that serves to bind them

D. JEFF BURTON is an author and a former member of the Sunstone Board of Directors.

to me and, hopefully, has provided a defining moment in their lives.

I do admit that I feel a bit hypocritical, given that I don't believe everything baptism is claimed to entail, but this guilt is offset by the message of love and support my participation provides to my kids. Who can deny the power of a baptismal service? Regardless of my own misgivings, denying my children my participation in this important rite of passage would be a misfortune I would regret for the rest of my life. But not everyone can follow in my steps. In that case, I would suggest talking to the bishop and then getting someone your children want to do the baptism, e.g., a beloved grandfather.

Here is a completely different experience from Robert:

We decided not to baptize our three children at age eight. They seemed too young to know what they were doing. By the time our older daughter was eight, my wife and I were in the Borderlands, and we remained mostly inactive until our youngest headed off to high school.

None of our children have elected to get baptized, and we haven't pushed it. Nevertheless, I think they turned out very well: they're accomplished, moral, and very supportive of our recent decision to go back to church as Borderland participants.

Our best friends in the Church know enough about our situation that they don't worry about our children, but some of our ward members seem to assume that the situation with our kids gives us real heartache and that we are actively trying to get them back to Church. But we are at peace with things the way they are. The kids come around often enough to observe what the Church does and doesn't do for us. They can make their own decisions. If they like what they see, they're smart enough to get involved. We'll see what happens as time passes. Besides, the D&C says that if parents don't teach children, the sins are on the parents. I'm happy to take that burden for them.

Here are some thoughts and experiences from Reed, from whom we will hear more in a future column:

I am looking for advice on how to deal with my status in Mormonism and recently ran across SUNSTONE, your website, and past Borderland articles. I have been

struggling with my faith for about four years now. You'll probably find this humorous, but I went through the trouble of moving out of a ward where I was serving as a counselor to the bishop so that I could get released—with my closet-doubter status, the calling was causing me too much stress. My wife (who is very supportive of me) has a non-Mormon brother who laughed it up when I told him the reason I had moved.



After my release (and since our four children were approaching adulthood), I found myself with a lot of time to read, research, and think, which led me to my current distress.

Over this last summer, I connected with a helpful “mentoring” program that the Institute for Religious Research (IRR)³ offered for Mormons who were questioning their faith. They hooked me up with a now-devout evangelical Christian and former Mormon, who has been immensely helpful in many respects. But recently, he's been trying to make me into a “real” Christian. Since I have encountered as many biblical concerns during my journey as I have Book of Mormon concerns, I've probably reached the point where corresponding with this

“mentor” is no longer helpful. Besides, he has little to offer in the way of helping me deal with my kids.

For now, I am staying in your “Group 2” Borderlands for the sake of my family—especially my wife and kids. We raised our oldest son as a “Group 1” Mormon; he has since served a mission and now is attending BYU. Our oldest daughter, just out of high school, is kind of liberal and very thoughtful, but still

feels comfortable in “Group 1.” She will start this fall at our local university. It will be interesting to watch her encounter new perspectives; I'm looking forward to seeing where she ends up.

Now I'm concentrating on trying to temper the effect of the Church's teachings on our two younger daughters (aged 16 and 13). We discuss the things they learn in church classes and seminary, and I provide them with liberal, Christ-centered perspectives and interpretations. My middle daughter is quite academic (differing from her two sisters, who seem to prefer performing arts, music, theater, and active social lives), and she seems to be reaching conclusions similar to mine about the Church. These familial considerations

often make me lean one way one week, and the other way the next, making me feel schizophrenic about my Mormonism as I try to serve my kids and my wife.

Zeke is an outstanding young man I met at last summer's Sunstone Symposium in Ogden, Utah. We have recently exchanged emails, and I hope to include more of his ongoing story in future columns. Here is a snippet of his experience:

I'm a 21-year-old who became a Borderlander in my teens, so I did not go on a mission when I was nineteen. My dad has been a Borderlander for as long as I can remember, and it rubbed off on me, so when I made friends with an evangelical Christian in high school, it didn't take long for me to replace my Mormonism with Protestantism, at least for a while.

When I started college, I took things a step further and became a near atheist for a few months, but over the past year or so, I've reconciled myself to Mormonism to the extent that I've acquired a limited-use temple recommend and am preparing for a possible mission next summer. I still have issues with many components of Mormonism, ranging from the origins of the Book of Mormon to the existence and divinity of Christ himself, but I feel like a mission is still worth my time for a number of reasons. Social acceptance and my own curiosity are definitely on the list, but mainly I feel at peace with my Mormonism and wish to bring that peace to others. I also want to help those who are experiencing doubt to avoid the pain that tormented me for a while. I realize, however, that a mission is a highly-focused exercise in traditional Mormon dogma, and I anticipate encountering some difficulty talking to investigators and members who may have no interest in my Borderlander insights. Hence, I am writing to solicit advice from other Borderlanders who have served missions regarding how they balanced (or would have balanced) their own beliefs with the needs of the mission.

My dad and I had a nice chat with another man at the Symposium about the resentment and betrayal they both felt when they first learned about the "dark side" of the Church. I observed that, while I definitely experienced those feelings of bitterness and resentment when I was about sixteen, they left me relatively quickly (compared with how long they affected my dad, anyway). I thought maybe it was

because my trauma occurred during high school, when life seems to move extra fast for everyone. However, my dad pointed out that, as the oldest child in our family, I was something of an experiment, essentially raised to be a Borderlander from birth. I'm sure my dad would be happy to give his side of things and explain why he did what he did, but for now I'll just point out to those who think they must pick a side for the sake of their children, that their children might well appreciate the chance to choose (or not choose) for themselves.

SO, good readers, can any of you shed light on this important topic? What have been your experiences? What strategies have (or haven't) worked with your kids? If we've been successful Borderlanders, should we invite our children over before they panic and jump ship? Will they be angry with us later on if we keep our status a secret? How can we get our kids to be honest about their true thoughts and beliefs?

I'll pass along anything you send me.⁴

One more question: Someone who says he knew Mitt Romney in the mission field told me that Mitt was not a "true believer" at the time. Has Mitt lived in the Borderlands? Does he now? Send me any information you might have.

NOTES

1. In my first column, 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 at the head of this article.

2. My mission experience has been described in previous columns. Copies of previous columns can be downloaded for free at www.forthose-whowonder.com.

3. The IRR is a self-described "nondenominational, evangelical Christian ministry of apologetics and discernment."

4. Please contact me at jeff@eburton.com.

Please send me your experiences from life in the Borderlands.

*D. Jeff Burton,
djeffburton@gmail.com*



BUSH MEN

(for R.D.)

river rushes north
along aged Indian

trails cupping hands
with scout guides

and ghosts of foreign
navigators once lost

among mosquito marsh
and dense brush, asking

sustenance from
unforgiving earth

plucking berries
you picked in autumn

before she turned
gold to silver and

mud brown—the
end of hunting

and the creation of
renewed paths, when

beauty paved the road to
harshness, we gathered

dancing in deer skins, to
the sacred drum, hoping

to find the heartbeat that
remained

BRADLEY MCILWAIN