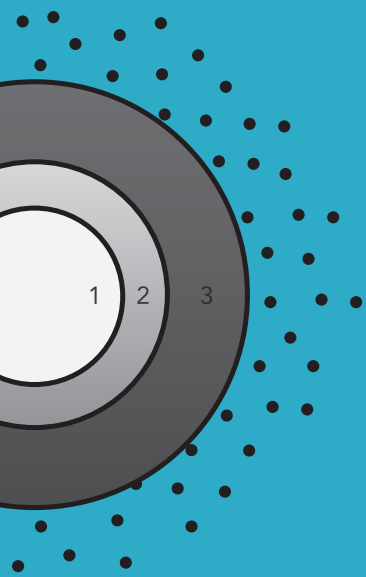


MYSTERIOUS WAY

By D. Jeff Burton



MEMBERSHIP GROUPS

- 1 - **CORE MEMBERS:** True believers; unwaveringly supportive; the acceptable.
 - 2 - **BORDERLANDS MEMBERS:** Those who consider themselves faithful to and part of the Church but who don't fit comfortably in Group 1.
 - 3 - **MEMBERS-OF-RECORD ONLY:** Non-participants, non-believers, non-supporters.
- DOTS:** Previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

In this column I share the story of Jennifer and her husband as they struggle to adapt to Borderland life during some rather large changes. In addition to editing and shortening our many emails, I have changed names and details to protect identities.

JENNIFER: My husband, John, a school principal by profession, has been in the Borderlands for several years now. (I am moving in that direction.) I would describe him as a spiritual person—a believer in God who loves authentic Mormonism (and other faith traditions), but who feels he has outgrown the Church structure. He would

have withdrawn from activity altogether but for me, our family, and a couple of ward friends. He also didn't want to lose the years of investment he has put into our current ward. Although he dislikes the Church's corporate feel and desire for conformity, he has kept up his activity and is even starting to have a subtle but noticeable influence in his elders quorum, helping them learn to value different points of view. During the past year, he has even used your book to help several people deal with their own doubts.¹

But now we are facing a potential problem. The rumor is that

some families in our neighborhood will be reassigned to a smaller, “struggling” ward that is 35 minutes away (versus the 12 minute commute to our current building). We will likely be one of those families. John sees this change not as a challenge, but as a message that it might be time to consider moving out of Mormonism. This is a real shame because he has a lot to offer. He speaks often at interfaith meetings, steadies members who are going through disillusionment, and provides leadership in our community’s educational programs. Everyone seems to recognize his ability to work with people except the leaders of his own church. Since he does not fit the mold of a typical church leader/manager, he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to use his talents or have much real influence in a ward setting. And that is extremely demoralizing to him. He doesn’t think he can face starting over in a new ward.

Discussing this with our bishop seems futile, as, bless his heart, his advice always boils down to obedience. That used to work for us, but it rings hollow now.

I am open to considering other options outside of Mormonism, but I really don’t think we would be as comfortable anywhere else. Our middle son will turn eight this year, and I’m sure he’s looking forward to his dad baptizing him. How can we possibly disrupt our kids’ lives and expectations? Church gives us a place to serve, it provides many of our friends, and I just know we are going to need support from a church community sometime in the future.

JEFF: Your husband’s story fits my own to some degree—and that of many others in the Borderlands.

This situation will require cooperation and good will between the two of you. Column 39 discusses how to keep a marriage strong while dealing with such challenges. Maybe you’ll find something useful there. Is John aware of your email to me? Is he interested in joining in?

JENNIFER: My husband is willing to join the conversation. I’ll pass along what he thinks and says. We’ll look at Column 39 first.

JENNIFER: [Consolidated emails over several months time.] Well, our stake did make the changes, sending us and six other families to that small ward far away. We decided to go. Though the mem-

bers in our new ward are friendly, the ward itself is somewhat stagnant, consisting mainly of older members, farmers, and blue-collar workers. After sending out “feelers” in talks and class comments, we have not found anyone who seems interested in considering the gospel in what we consider a different or fresh way. I don’t mean that we are hoping for a deep, intellectual focus, just a willingness to consider questions instead of the same old answers. (John and I both have college degrees, and are curious by nature.) We are feeling disheartened. We often leave church feeling worse than we did going in. The long drive only accentuates the alienation.

I wish we had been more honest with the new bishop when we changed wards, but I wanted to try to contribute to the new ward. I have been seriously considering telling the bishop (who suspects John is not comfortable, but assumes that I am happy) that it would be best for our family if we returned to our old ward where John has a couple of hard-won, true friends (three active, two inactive) who understand him. I know that saying something like this to the bishop would: 1) brand us as uncooperative, 2) set a bad example for the other families in our ward, and 3) seem as if we are deserting a ward that needs us. But what doth it profit a man to gain the whole ward and lose his own family? If we attend the old ward, John’s concerns won’t go away, but we would come home from church every week feeling happy and accepted, and I’m pretty sure he would participate more easily. Plus, going to this new ward puts a strain on our relationship every Sunday.

JEFF: I’ve read your emails and discussed them with my wife. Having lived in a ward that required a long drive, I can sympathize with your frustrations. Plus, being asked to leave your old ward and all your friends (without giving you a choice) can be kind of tough.

I think you could approach your bishop with your concerns and ask about going back to your old ward. But wait until both you and John have an agreed-upon plan in mind.

Your support of John is quite amazing. You two must have developed a secure and caring relationship, but it is easy to understand how this situation could introduce some new stress. I encourage you to be patient and work together. Something good will happen eventually (perhaps you will both decide to become contented, open Borderlanders, for example). Patience and love are always



worth the effort. Perhaps marriage counseling would be helpful?

JENNIFER: [A few weeks later.] Okay, we started to get some counseling and it has been very helpful. During our second session we had a long discussion and decided that it would be best to transfer back to our old ward. However, John wanted to take a few weeks to think about our plan. It was a stressful time for me. Sometimes I couldn't sleep at night, trying to think of what we might say to the bishop about our decision.

But before we made the appointment, we received a call to meet with our stake president, someone we don't know too well. As the stake president was getting to know John, John tried to drop a lot of hints about having his own ideas, and not being "in the mold." Then, to our surprise, the stake president asked John to be the second counselor in the bishopric! We were shocked, though we tried not to show it. When the stake president asked if I would support John, I quickly looked at John and tried to read him. Should I say something now? I decided to simply say that I would support him.

John figures this is his chance to have some influence, and having influence feels good (if sometimes frustrating and risky). He likes the bishop well enough. (He's the same age as his father and kind of acts like him.) John has decided that he is going to continue to be himself, whatever the consequences. I'm concerned about how that might turn out. But I admit that I am very relieved that we are no longer in the middle of deciding what to do.

JEFF: When you described your new, struggling ward to me, my first thought was, "John will probably be called into the bishopric." Maybe the stake president planned it that way.

Being second counselor in a bishopric is one of the best callings in the Church. You'll both be able to do a lot of good for your new ward and its members. But if you stay in the closet, I would advise you to never be dishonest about it; never do or say anything that goes against your values. Those kinds of behaviors can make

it very difficult in the future to come out of the closet. And you really don't want to live with the memory of those deceptions; it's completely antithetical to what Christ intended for us. So don't fib during temple interviews; don't tell untruths from the pulpit; don't purposely give people false impressions about your beliefs, and so forth.

I've served in two bishoprics, on a stake high council, and two missions and never found myself having to lie or be untruthful, though I did have to exercise some care and thoughtfulness about what I said and did. Be tactful and judicious. You can read about the challenge of honesty for Borderlanders in the last chapter of

my book, or in several Borderland columns. Don't let this issue ruin the great service you can render during the coming years. I've seen men and women eaten up by living double lives while they try to maintain their group status and positions.

JENNIFER: Thanks for your thoughts. John is pretty good about being tactful and honest. He always chooses his words carefully.

I need to learn to do this better. I'll look up those columns on your website.

I'm sure once the calling is announced (and many people will be surprised by it), people will ask how we feel—if we are overwhelmed. I can honestly say that I am excited about it because it gives us a focus, and saves us from the hand-wringing we've been doing for the past few months. It shows that there is room for us in the Church.

JEFF: When people of your education, experience, and family move (or are moved) in to a "struggling" ward, it usually isn't long before they are tapped for leadership. People in our ward and stake in Bountiful, Utah are sometimes asked to attend a ward in the "inner city," with the expectation that they will be called to some leadership position.

Sounds like you both are going to make the best of this opportunity. Your attitudes feel very constructive.

MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS, "JOHN WILL PROBABLY BE CALLED INTO THE BISHOPRIC."

JENNIFER: [About six months later.] I thought I would check in and give you the latest. After a couple of months, John started feeling he had gained a small amount of influence in his second counselor position, especially in the youth program. For example, he helped the Young Women leaders feel empowered to make their own decisions about which stories to use in lessons. And when there was a kind of retrenchment in the stake over YW camp attire, he helped ensure that the new guidelines were based on common sense and temperance. He even helped reactivate a person who was troubled by Church history, and that person is now teaching the gospel essentials class.

But in recent months he has been coming home exhausted and physically stressed by his interactions at church. He seems to have no energy left to serve in the community or even the family sometimes. We both draw on other faith traditions as a part of our spiritual practice (e.g., we've read the Quran, meditated, observed Lent), but those things are only tolerated (at best) at church. He recently said to me, "I know that no organization, belief system, or people is perfect, but wouldn't it be nice to attend a place where we didn't have all this baggage? We could take anything we wanted with us. We might not find the perfect place, but shouldn't we be open to trying?"

"Here we go again," I thought. Even though he has a point, I worry that we would be giving up too much.

After talking about it for a while, we decided to wait a couple of months and then tell our good bishop that we were just burned out and needed to return to our former ward to catch our breath. (But only after the Primary program is over in October. That's where I serve.) After all, there are people in our old ward who need us, too (other Borderlanders!), I told myself.

Then, last Sunday, John was called to be the first counselor in the bishopric! I guess there are powers beyond our own that need to be acknowledged. So for now, we're staying put. I'll keep you posted.

JEFF: And I'll pass new developments along to our readers as they occur. Thanks for sharing! 🌟

Footnote 1. In my first column (this is column 49), 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 Borderland columns are available for free download at: www.forthosenwonder.com.