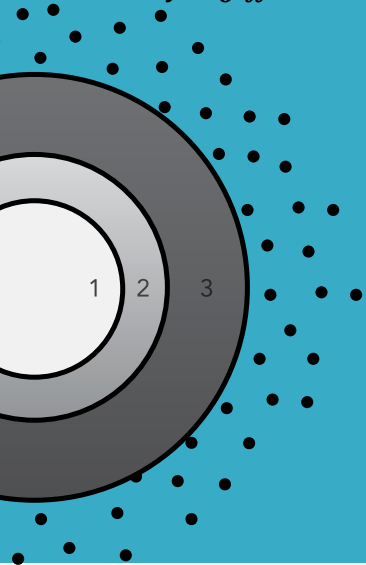


# STAYING IN THE CHURCH AND MAKING IT WORK

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-participators, non-believers, non-supporters.
- DOTS:** Previous members, prior investigators, and non-LDS family members.

IN APRIL OF 2014, I participated in a Sunstone-sponsored conference called “Navigating the Borderlands.”<sup>1</sup> My assigned topic was “Staying in the Church and Making it Work.” I covered ten principles and action items that I (and others) have found useful. In this column and the next, I will provide and expand upon these staying principles and action items.

### ITEM 1. *Do a self-assessment.*<sup>2</sup>

During a calm period, ask (and answer) some important questions about your life, such as: “Where am I religiously?” “What do I actually believe?” “What are my doubts?” “What do I like/dislike about the Church?”<sup>3</sup> “What do I *want* to do?” “What do I *need* to do?” “What would be best for me, and what would be best for my significant others (like spouse and children)?”

You may need help exploring these questions. A counselor can be beneficial, so can a good friend or loving spouse. This assessment may require several months of honest self-inspection to complete. Don't be in a hurry. After you have made your initial assessment, be

open to making re-assessments as often as is necessary. What you are striving for is an accurate picture of yourself, your needs, and your wants. You are trying to discern yourself as you really are, not as you “should” be.

### ITEM 2. *Make a decision about whether you'll “stay” or “leave.”*

Staying (or leaving) should be predicated on your *real* needs and wants. If you put enough work into the self-assessment, your ability to accurately determine your real needs and wants will be much improved. If you put off a decision for too long, you'll start wasting time and energy; you'll fall into unnecessary anxiety and confusion. For the purposes of the rest of this column I'll assume you are exploring the decision to stay. How we define “staying” is addressed in the next item.

### ITEM 3. *Develop a model for your religious life that is compatible with the LDS model.*<sup>4</sup>

In this step, you'll be creating a list of beliefs, behaviors and at-

titudes that you will choose to follow. It's important that this model be LDS-compatible, but it must also nourish *you*.

You can start developing the outlines of a personal religion based on Jesus' teachings and LDS expectations. You may be surprised to find out how many of your personal beliefs, attitudes, and intended behaviors will overlap with the traditional Mormon ones. You want to be honest, right? So do orthodox Mormons. How about stealing? Lying? Cheating? You probably won't be engaging in any of them. What about the two great commandments (love God, love your neighbor)? This is one more place where you'll again find yourself agreeing with your orthodox Mormon neighbors. However, you may find yourself diverging from them when it comes to the less-important elements of the Mormon model such as which meetings you will attend and how often, which parts of the Word of Wisdom you will observe, or how you will respond to Church callings.

Remember, the more compatible your model is with the LDS model, (e.g., regular attendance at sacrament meeting) the more likely you are to connect with other church members.

A few hints:

- Write your model down on paper.
- Review it with trusted others.
- Make changes as necessary and desirable.
- Be flexible.

Although this self-modeling effort is worthwhile and necessary, it brings potential risks with it. Your spouse, children, and/or Mormon neighbors may feel threatened by your personal rearrangement of the standard model. Don't be too quick to judge them. Ask yourself: What if my family members followed my lead and created their own personal religious models with elements that *I* felt threatened by? Your leaders may also misunderstand or disapprove of your model, distancing themselves from you at first. This personalized approach can also cause trouble if the changes you make are sudden, disruptive to family unity, or incompatible with Christ's gospel.

#### ITEM 4. *Manage your loss or lack of belief/testimony.*<sup>5</sup>

If you are trying to stay, you have probably experienced the loss of belief or testimony. I am not talking about loss of faith. Indeed, faith is often a coping mechanism for *when* one loses belief. I am talking about the loss of intellectual belief in unique LDS teachings such as the Book of Mormon's historicity. The evaporation of your

belief or testimony was probably a major loss for you to begin with. It may have resulted in your losing church callings, peace of mind, self-esteem, family relationships, and friendships.

Decades ago, the counselor Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identified phases many people go through when they experience a major loss, namely: shock and denial, anger, negotiation, depression and sadness, and acceptance of the reality of the situation. A person experiencing a loss of belief will likely go through these phases (and probably should). The length of each stage will depend on the person. Some stages may span only a few days or weeks. Others may stretch for years. If you are considering using this model to maintain your membership in the Church, you have probably passed through the denial phase. Perhaps you are carrying anger around right now. It's entirely understandable. I've known some people who have been burdened with anger for years.

To advance to the acceptance stage, you need to learn to manage your emotions. Unfortunately, this is often not possible to do alone. I think it is wise to get help. Counselors are available, as well as thoughtful bishops, understanding friends, and empathetic family members. If you've stopped somewhere short of acceptance, comfortably staying within the Church will be much more difficult.

#### ITEM 5. *Create and enhance your motivations for staying.*<sup>6</sup>

The first thing you will notice after adopting a new model for a religious life is the need for new motivators. Prime motivators for following the Mormon model include both the presenting motivators (the ones we like to mention, e.g., love of God, love of Church, individual growth, eternal rewards, personal satisfaction, tradition), and the hidden motivators (e.g., group pressure, guilt, fear, and possible divine punishment). These latter motivators, while strong, are often obscured and rarely mentioned, except perhaps when we deny their existence or importance. When they *are* mentioned, they're usually spun in a positive way: for example, "I couldn't afford *not* to pay tithing" is a positive and non-threatening way to say, "If you don't pay tithing, God will not only quit providing for you, he will take away that which you already have." Hidden motivators, recognized or not, are powerful and influential, and you must deal with them if you are to stay and maintain inner peace. You will need to evaluate how much these hidden motivators influence you.

Living the foundational principles of your new model (e.g., honesty, morality, love, kindness, giving, Christ's teachings) is essential to your success. Even if your motivators are not entirely



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constructive (e.g., guilt, fear, pride, trying to please the group), you will at least reap some benefits from enacting appropriate behaviors and attitudes. Blessings are largely the result of action, not ideals. Keep in mind that at this point you may still be acting partially at the behest of group pressures though the groups you identify with may have changed—from your ward, for instance, to a group of friends. Make sure to identify and evaluate these new pressures and whether they are constructive.

Hopefully, however, you will eventually move away from guilt, fear, and group pressure to begin adopting more constructive motivators—“I am honest because I *want* to be, and I know it is good for me and others,” or, “Christ showed us the way to live, and I believe he was right. So I do what he suggested.” Over time, earlier motivators can be replaced by more mature ones: personal choice, positive and loving attitudes, chosen behaviors, personal responsibility, and respect for your children. Rewards can continue to be a motivator, but hopefully you will seek out the simple rewards: peace, stable relationships, seeing your children happy. Reality and reason can also become important motivators, as can being open and honest with others.

ITEM 6. *Determine how your personal religious model affects significant others; adjust accordingly.*

You will need to see how your new attitudes and behaviors affect your children and spouse. Suppose you decide to stop going to Sunday school? How would that affect your teenage son? You may find that you choose to maintain particular behaviors even if they don't appeal to you because they have a positive impact on your family.

ITEM 7. *Maintain and protect important relationships.*

Nothing is as important as your family. If your new personal religion threatens to disrupt this relationship, you should adjust your model. It may take some time before you can “be yourself” without causing discord. Be flexible for your sake and for your family's.

ITEM 8. *Try to fit into the definition of LDS “acceptability.”*<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to say how “acceptability” should be defined because it is often subject to local interpretation. An acceptable Mormon is usually a member of the Church who has faith in and tries

to live Christ's teachings as described in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. According to Joseph F. Smith, an acceptable member also “believes in God and has [at least] a little faith in the Church organization.” And Henri Amiel encourages us to espouse “truth above all, even when it upsets and overwhelms us.”

That's pretty broad, I know. Depending on your location, others of your ward brothers and sisters may have more strict criteria of acceptability, putting a greater premium on Church attendance and activity, manner of dress, temple attendance, following the Word of Wisdom, and so forth. Whether you like it or not, you may be judged on criteria not your own. Some people may have a negative attitude toward you at first. The fastest way to soften their hearts is to soften your own and accept them as you hope they will accept you.<sup>8</sup>

ITEM 9. *Try to be open and thoughtfully honest with others.*<sup>9</sup>

It is disconcerting that many members of the Church do not feel that they can always be honest about beliefs or thoughts that do not follow a specific format. Hopefully this will change over time. But for now, your attempts at thoughtful honesty will be a balancing act. The thirteenth Article of Faith says, “We believe in being honest,” and Ephesians 4:25 enjoins us to “Speak truth to each one of you with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.” Apostle David B. Haight once said, “[current events] demonstrate the need for honesty and integrity in family relationships, in business affairs, and in . . . religious ministries.”<sup>10</sup>

Care, tact, and timing will be important facets of your thoughtful honesty in today's church. Consideration for your children, spouse, and others requires careful management of how you express your true beliefs, feelings, and desires. You'll need to learn to speak “truthfully but discreetly.” When asked to bear testimony, for example, you may say something like, “I know the Church teaches correct principles. I know that the Lord answers prayers. He loves every person. We must all work out our own salvation.” Can you accept the president of the Church as a prophet, seer, and revelator? You might say, “Why not? Certainly no one else speaks for God,” or “I can accept the possibility that he is a prophet,” or, “I accept, with what faith I have.”

ITEM 10. *Get help as needed; then help others.*<sup>11</sup>

Don't be afraid to admit when you need help. None of us go-

ing through these steps can do it alone. Help can often be found in a loving bishop, a caring spouse or parent, or a good counselor. And helping others in the same boat as you can also be a form of self-help. Look for opportunities to be of assistance to others going in your direction.

As a “helper” yourself, you need to show concern, non-judgment, and understanding for the pain and difficulty the religious doubter is experiencing. In addition, there are a number of practical suggestions (or challenges) you can offer the person:


- Look within, analyze your feelings, and determine your true beliefs; don’t be afraid of what you find. Be honest with yourself.

- Recognize that some people may never “know” (see D&C 46:13–14).

- Talk about questions and doubts in tactful, nonthreatening ways. Be willing to listen to the insights of others. Don’t forget to express positive beliefs and levels of faith, too.

- Share your experiences and what you know.

Finally, you should leave hope with those you help. James Francis Cooke said it well: “The most welcomed people of the world are never those who look back upon the bitter frustrations of yesterday, but those who cast their eyes forward with faith, hope, courage, and happy curiosity.”

In our next column, I will share the stories of several Borderlanders who have successfully made the decision to stay. 

## NOTES

1. Sunstone’s Navigating the Borderlands Conference, held on 4 April 2014 in Salt Lake City, was organized by Katie Langston and Lindsay Park. It consisted of four presentations: “Giving Yourself Permission to Explore/Own Your Own Spirituality” by Phyllis Barber, “Staying in the Church and Making it Work” by D. Jeff Burton, “Leaving the Church and Making it Work” by Timothy Weymann, and “How to Navigate Relationships in a Faith Transition” by Joanna Brooks. Video of the conference is available at <https://www.sunstonemagazine.com/sunstones-navigating-the-borderlands-2014>.

2. See chapter 4 of *For Those Who Wonder* for more thoughts on this issue. A free copy is available for download at: [www.forthosewhowonder.com](http://www.forthosewhowonder.com). Note: SUNSTONE Borderland Columns are also available for free download. Many expand on the “staying principles” and describe Borderland members’ experiences with them.

3. “Church” refers to LDS organization, authority, structure, official programs, genera, doctrine; “church” refers to LDS people, ward, friends, activities, folklore.

4. Chapter 9 of *For Those Who Wonder* provides a copy of my own personal religious model. It is probably not one you should adopt for yourself, but it provides an example of how one can be constructed. See endnote 2 for how to obtain a free copy of the book.

5. See chapter 7 of *For Those Who Wonder* for more thoughts on this issue.

6. See chapter 9 of *For Those Who Wonder* for more thoughts on this issue.

7. See chapter 12 of *For Those Who Wonder* for more thoughts on this issue.

8. Here are a few thoughts for expanding acceptance at your local level: 1.

Tactfully and lovingly let your local leaders and ward members know of your feelings and concerns. Speak out as appropriate. It is best to be polite, loving, and Christ-like in your comments and suggestions. 2. Allow time for your concerns to be addressed. The Church is led by well-meaning, inspiration-worthy leaders who will likely help address your concerns. 3. Work for change through regular and appropriate channels. 4. Support truth. Work and pray to understand the issues and then tactfully and humbly share what you know with others, as warranted and appropriate. 5. Be honest with yourself and others in your communications. 6. Be careful not to hurt others by your actions. Let Christ’s example be your guide.

9. See chapter 16 of *For Those Who Wonder* for more thoughts on this issue.

10. David B. Haight, “Ethics and Honesty,” *Ensign*, November 1987, 13.

11. See chapter 1 of *For Those Who Wonder* for more thoughts on this issue.