

On Building the Kingdom with *Dialogue*

By Eugene England

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IN THE SPRING 1987 issue of DIALOGUE, the first of the twentieth-anniversary issues, I was referred to as “the founding editor of DIALOGUE.” That is not true. I was merely one of a group of five people (along with Joseph Jeppson, Wesley Johnson, Frances Menlove, and Paul Salisbury) who got together in the summer of 1965 to consider starting an independent journal of Mormon thought. Diane Monson, who knew us all and had heard us each separately talk of the need and possibility of such a journal, had suggested we get together. We decided to go ahead and added Richard Bushman and Ed Geary to our group, then a large board of editors and many associate and assistant editors over the next few years as we actually produced the journal.

Founding and continuing DIALOGUE has been in many ways a typical Mormon cooperative lay Church endeavor: Though it was not officially directed by Church authority, it was certainly guided by the firm commitments of those involved to contribute to the kingdom of God with all of their talents and means—and it was accordingly blessed, I believe, with divine assistance. It was not the brain child or exclusive work of one person or even a small group and was not engaged in for pay or professional advancement. The only reason Jack and Linda Newell made that slip about me being *the* founding editor is probably that I have been the only one of the founders who simply could not lose my infatuation and move on to other things. Instead, *Dialogue*, the journal and the process, became an ongoing love: I was the only one of the original group who continued to do some editing for a while and who has from the first published regularly in DIALOGUE. Perhaps for that reason, more of the appreciation—and the blame—than I deserve for the journal’s existence has focused on me. At least we can be grateful that Jack and Linda didn’t identify me, as did the editors at Bookcraft on the jacket of my recent book, as “a foundling editor of DIALOGUE.”

At any rate, not long after we started DIALOGUE, word came back to me that it was well-known that I had apostatized and was practicing polygamy. It seems to have been hard for some to see us succeed, since they apparently believed, against the evidence of all our theology and history, that if Mormon activities aren’t conducted officially then they must be apostate. But whatever else we were, we founders were, in venerable Mormon fashion, building the kingdom, most of us

quite consciously. We were not revolting against the established Church or forming our own elitist alternative or even “steadying the ark”—though we were certainly accused of all these. We were mainly trying to fulfill our temple covenants—and our intuitive sense of heritage—by using our God-given talents and training to serve God and neighbor. We were focusing on those neighbors closest to us in our own Church and culture—our fellow students and teachers. Even the specific form that service took, founding an independent Mormon journal, had a venerable tradition. That tradition began with Benjamin Winchester’s *The Gospel Reflector*, which was published in Philadelphia for six months in 1841, and concerning which Joseph Smith told Winchester he was “at liberty to publish anything of the kind that would further the cause of righteousness” (see David J. Whittaker, “Early Mormon Pamphleteering,” Ph.D. dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1982, 153ff). And the tradition continued with *The Woman’s Exponent*, *The Relief Society Magazine*, *The Children’s Friend*, etc. In fact, Leonard Arrington reminded us at one point in the late 1960s that every official Church magazine then in existence had started out as some kind of independent journal.

Certainly our Mormon training and sense of purpose deeply affected all we did. The original group talked over the idea for a journal for a few weeks, prayed about it, and, blissfully unaware of the enormous effort that loomed ahead, decided to proceed. We each contributed \$25 (the only capitalization DIALOGUE has ever had). Not only was that all we could afford (we were all in graduate school or low-paying first jobs), but we felt that if the journal were as much needed as we believed it was, our faith would be blessed with results. It was. That \$125 paid for mailing a simple prospectus to a few hundred friends, and they started sending checks—even though we hadn’t announced a price. We used the money we received to pay for a brochure, beautifully designed by Paul Salisbury, which we sent to about 10,000 names, mostly from the *Directory of LDS Scholars* then being published yearly at BYU. (That was the last year, for some reason, that BYU President Ernest Wilkinson allowed it to be published.) Subscriptions poured in at such a rate that by the time we went to press with our first issue, we had enough saved to more than pay for the first year’s four issues. In fact, we were so naive that we thought we had a moral obligation to *keep* enough in savings to pay for all the issues we owed subscribers in the future. We later found that no periodical operates that way.

That initial lay Mormon faith and naiveté took various forms: We didn’t pay anyone anything—except for printing. Wes Johnson arranged to use part of his office at Stanford (the history department was pleased to have us there); we editors all donated our time; and I invited students and young singles from the Stanford Ward, where I was in the bishopric and we had no official program for the youth, to join us on Tuesday nights in a kind of Mutual Improvement Association activity. An average of fifteen to twenty people came every Tuesday through the fall and winter of 1965–66 and a smaller group in succeeding years. We opened with prayer, typed address labels for the brochure and then the subscriptions (it didn’t occur to us to do an expensive computerized list), did the bookkeeping, helped process and edit manuscripts, proofread galleys—and joined in wondering and rejoicing at and then answering the letters we received from all over the world. We had long group

discussions about the faith and doubt and anguish expressed in the letters and the issues raised in the manuscripts. It was one of the best MIAs I've ever seen, and it built a lot of faith and love.

Eventually, of course, DIALOGUE's managers found that paying a regular secretary and doing computerized mailing was much more efficient, that as curiosity declined somewhat, subscriptions did too, making it difficult to keep a cash reserve, and that we just couldn't ask skilled editors to serve without some salary (though we didn't have sense enough to see that until too late for the founding editors). Thus DIALOGUE has become, in twenty years, a highly professional, stable, slowly growing institution, with carefully established financial control, a clear tradition of the highest editorial and design quality, and a conservative process for choosing new editors and maintaining its traditional purposes and quality when editors change.

I confess I sometimes yearn for those early days of naive faith, daily rewarded in exciting, sometimes scary, experiences—much in the way I sometimes yearn for the early periods of naive living the law of consecration and of personalized leadership that have marked each new dispensation of the kingdom of God. But just as the Church is no longer able to operate as it did at the Waters of Mormon or in Kirtland or Orderville, because it has embraced a larger, world-wide mission, so DIALOGUE cannot be what it was at Stanford. Like the Church, it is now an institution, with a history as well as a mission. Its responsibilities, and the harm done when it makes mistakes in selection or editing or misuses its position to promote unworthy causes or insincere people, are great—because of what it has already accomplished in helping to build the kingdom and because of the faith many people therefore place in it. As Linda Newell has said, the editors of DIALOGUE take on a spiritual stewardship.

What has the journal accomplished that makes this true? At the very time when the Church's size and explosive growth were producing centralization and bureaucratization (in a word, correlation) that could easily have become paramount in Mormonism, DIALOGUE has led the way in maintaining and reinvigorating the important Mormon inclination to grassroots lay initiative. Since its founding, in close cooperation with the Mormon History Association, the first independent Mormon scholarly association, over fifteen independent periodicals, at least twelve independent scholarly and cultural associations, and scores of independent lay service and charitable organizations have been formed. DIALOGUE played a major role, increasingly helped by those other periodicals and associations, in establishing a faithful intellectual and artistic community within the Mormon community and in promoting what Leonard Arrington, in the last chapter of *The Mormon Experience*, calls "the independent sector."

The responses to our first prospectus and then the brochure and first issue soon demonstrated the potential for such a community and that the community had not previously existed: Five or six groups wrote saying they had been thinking of founding such a journal but would now support our effort. Hundreds of people wrote from all over the world, teenagers to octogenarians, saying that they had yearned for someone to talk to—something intelligent and beautiful to read that spoke directly to their particular Mormon concerns. From evidence in the continuing response in

letters to the editors received regularly to this day, the journal met and meets this need for a particular kind of community, for thousands of Mormons.

We responded to the hunger we detected by not only publishing the kind of journal we did but by forming or encouraging DIALOGUE study groups. We traveled to speak to them and appointed members of the board of editors and then college students on the board of associate editors to lead and encourage such groups. We wrote many letters, often helping troubled people resolve some of their doubts about the gospel and their anger at the Church. We intentionally instituted a costly and cumbersome editorial process, sending each manuscript to three diverse editors for criticism and suggestions and then reviewing each in long sessions and adding our own suggestions, so that for the first time there was a regular, effective way to help Mormons improve the quality of their Church-related scholarship and thinking and writing.

That process paid off in the increasing quality of the journal and, I believe, in that of other journals, like *BYU Studies*, *Exponent II*, *Sunstone*, and yes, the *Ensign* and *New Era*. From the first, we received and published some magnificent, landmark, scholarly and artistic work. The editorial process, based in a developing sense of a mutually respectful community in which we could criticize each other and help each other grow in both understanding and faith, helped produce fine *new* things that would have previously been impossible in Mormon publications: I think of Carol Hansen's ground-breaking personal essay, "The Death of a Son," the challenging roundtables on Vietnam and urbanization and civil disobedience, and Lester Bush's thorough and influential review of Mormon policy and practice—and lack of doctrine—concerning blacks and the priesthood.

I am perhaps most delighted that DIALOGUE published, encouraged—even helped many Mormons first learn to write and appreciate—the personal essay. I am convinced that that particular literary form, which has only recently begun to achieve its proper recognition in world literature, best expresses the Mormon theological and cultural qualities: It allows us to bear witness, in effectively artistic ways, to our personal religious and moral experience and to the development of our eternal selves as children of God and members of a covenant community. It encourages in us the most effective kind of voice, that of the great writers of scriptures and givers of sermons in our tradition—from Nephi and Alma and Mormon to Joseph and Brigham and Spencer: The voice is rooted in the extremes of honestly revealed feeling and experience, from doubt and inadequacy and anguish to exalted faith and love and encounters with divinity. It is the voice that seems to come more naturally in modern Mormon literature to Mormon women, perhaps because they are relieved from the self-consciousness and tendency to project an ambitious, safe, invulnerable middle-range voice that we mistakenly assume must come with the priesthood. Being freer than men to develop that soft, yet piercing voice may be the reason Mormon women, unlike those in any other culture, have always written as well and published as much good work as Mormon men. DIALOGUE has for twenty years published most of the best writing by Mormon women and has also encouraged Mormon men to develop that same honest, meek, and thus more genuinely powerful, prophetic voice that makes the personal essay work. That voice, in that genre, can,

I believe, not only help us develop a more valuable Mormon literary culture but may become our major contribution to world literature.

The tradition of honest personal writing and genuine dialogue, fostered by our independent journals, will, I believe, increasingly contribute to the religious mission of the Church. Much writing is pose, and much religious expression is dogmatic. But personal essays, critical letters to the editors and published rebuttals to articles, and roundtables that thoroughly examine a range of points of view all tend to undermine pose and dogmatism—unless, of course, they indulge in the particular varieties of cant and dogmatism to which intellectuals are inclined.

DIALOGUE has published some intellectual posturing, but it has also led the way in demonstrating new possibilities for faithful Mormon thought and writing. Its success and innovations were a major factor, according to reports from some who participated, in the reinvigoration and continued publication of *BYU Studies* in the late 1960s and in the reorganization and redesign of the Church magazines in 1970. Some have claimed that DIALOGUE, especially that article by Lester Bush, helped prepare Church leaders for the 1978 revelation giving the blacks the priesthood. These claims may be true. But I think even more profound contributions have been made to the kingdom in providing many Mormons of all ages a wider definition of what it means to be a Latter-day Saint, one that can include *them*.

Some have hoped that DIALOGUE would usher in a new age of liberal, rational Mormonism, perhaps presided over by Sterling McMurrin as honorary apostle. That has, fortunately, not happened. Neither, despite all the doom-saying in some circles, has the opposite happened. When some of us founding editors visited Utah in the fall of 1965, seeking counsel and support from Mormon scholars, one at the University of Utah said, “The Church will roll over you like a bulldozer and crush you out of existence.” One at BYU reached up on his bookshelf, brought down the four volumes of *Week-day Religious Education*, a semi-independent journal, in many ways like DIALOGUE, that he had helped found in the 1930s, and said, “As soon as you publish an article by Sterling McMurrin, like we did, the Church will stop you, like they did us.” And after our first issue came out, a noted BYU intellectual, with a copy in hand, bemoaned to Richard Bushman, “Well, it seemed like a good idea, but this will finish you.” All three prophecies failed: DIALOGUE has become neither the radical diatribe nor the reactionary cop-out many feared or hoped, and it has not been either suppressed or sanctioned but has continued, done more good than bad—and improved.

DIALOGUE has certainly not stemmed Mormon anti-intellectualism. As Davis Bitton showed, in one of our early issues, anti-intellectualism has always characterized our revealed, populist, authoritarian religion. But neither has DIALOGUE provoked an anti-intellectual backlash among Church leaders or members. I can detect no particular trend in that regard over the past twenty years. Mormonism continues, as always, an intriguing, and for me quite reassuring, mixture of conservative and liberal elements. (It was McMurrin himself who first pointed out the interesting phenomenon that Joseph Smith’s teachings combine the most liberal theology concerning the nature of man and God with the most conservative moral rules and ecclesiastical structure.) During the past twenty years we have seen the

miraculous formation of Camelot, that exciting decade of professionalization of the writing of Mormon history under Leonard Arrington as Church Historian. We have also seen the rude ending of Camelot: The cancellation of a frank and complete official sesquicentennial history, the separation out of scholarly writing from the Church Historian's office, and perhaps some overly anxious buying and securing of troubling historical documents. We have seen increasingly more scholarly and humanistic presidents of BYU, and yet BYU remains the very center of ideological Mormon anti-intellectualism and anti-humanism. We have seen more people with advanced degrees made General Authorities, with no noticeable effect except that those chosen become less concerned about things intellectual.

All this is, I believe, as it should be. The Church is given by God for all of his children, with all their diverse gifts, only a few of which—and among the most dangerous—are the intellectual gifts of wisdom and knowledge. I would therefore expect, over time and on balance, no particular advantage or disadvantage for intellectuals. That, I believe, is happening. We easily remember that those intellectual gifts are among the ones promised by God to his Church in Doctrine and Covenants 46, but we forget that people who receive those gifts and the gift of riches are the very people that Nephi teaches tend to become “puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches” and that these are the ones Christ despiseth, “and save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility, he will not open unto them” (2 Ne. 9:42). Intellectual gifts, like riches, are much valued by the world, and the praise of the world is almost overwhelming in its power to produce pride. Engaging in *Dialogue*, both the journal and the process, can compound the pride, if such activity is used to show off or justify self or belittle others, but it can also express and lead to gentleness, vulnerability, openness, charity—to the meekness and lowliness of heart without which none of us is acceptable to God (Moro. 7:44). I believe that the journal has mainly fostered such charity and meekness and so has contributed significantly to the building of the restored kingdom of God in these latter days.

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