
INTERVIEW

A MIRROR TO GET PEOPLE THINKING AND TALKING

A Conversation with Bobbie Birleffi

On 13 May 1987 the Public Broadcasting Service documentary "The Mormons: Missionaries to the World" premiered across the United States. Even before airing, the film engaged controversy, culminating in a letter to all U.S. LDS wards from Howard W. Hunter, acting president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The letter acknowledged that the Church cooperated with the film's production but distanced the institution from the final product. There were also press stories about the Church's protest to PBS and KCTS, the local affiliate that produced the documentary.

To give members an opportunity to discuss the documentary with its creator, Bobbie Birleffi was invited to speak at the 1987 Washington Sunstone Symposium. This interview was conducted there by Bruce Bennett and Elbert Peck.

HOW DOES ONE GO ABOUT MAKING A DOCUMENTARY ON THE CHURCH AND GET ITS COOPERATION?

I grew up in Wyoming where I had considerable exposure to Mormon values and I was curious about why the Church is controversial in the first place.

Beginning the documentary was a slow process. It took months. As an outsider, I didn't know if the Church was approachable. It seemed to me like a huge institution that was closed off. So I took a research trip to Utah and visited the Church's Public Communications Department. They were concerned that since I was from Seattle I might be part of Saints Alive, which is a fundamentalist ex-Mormon, anti-Mormon group. I'd never heard of them. But the Church wanted some credentials, so I sent letters from other PBS people who knew me and copies of my films which covered controversial subjects. I wanted to show them that I took controversial subjects and dealt with them in a fair way. I had one about child molesters called "Men Who Molest," which was on PBS's *Frontline* and won a national Emmy, and one about the oil boom in Wyoming which included all the opposing sides and which was nominated

for a national Emmy. Sex, money, and now religion.

Because I had a small exploratory grant from the George D. Smith Fund, I decided to just film something on the missionary program. I didn't want to get into a situation where I was knee-deep in film and be in trouble. I wanted to be sure that somehow I was going to be able to make a film out the subject. So I shot a missionary farewell. The Pingree family graciously agreed and I didn't think there would be any problem. I didn't think you had to get everyone else on down the line to approve it. Once we started filming, the project became legitimate. The cameraman I used was Brian Capener, a respected filmmaker who had shot film for the Church, so it was not like I was totally a strange foreigner. Later I was told that the project discussed by the Council of the Twelve. Apparently they decided to cooperate with me on this documentary.

Initially, I thought that the whole film could be carried by one 19-year-old missionary. Well, it is difficult to find an articulate 19-year-old. I discovered that people were not getting articulate until they were in their mid-twenties. But I found a kid that I really liked; he was honestly able to express his feelings, he wanted to do it and I wanted to do it. The Church initially said okay, but it fell through because he was going to Chile and the Church didn't want crews following missionaries in Chile. (They had had several Mormon chapels bombed as sort of an anti-American thing.) So that wiped that out. Every time someone cancelled out, I was set back and had to start the search all over again.

After the Chile episode it became clear that I needed the Church to help me or it would take the rest of my life going around interviewing families before I finally found someone acceptable to both me and the Church. So I started asking the Church to give me four or five names of people I could interview for the film. They said fine. I selected Brian Munoz to follow through his mission. I wanted to focus on Latin

America because I wanted to go to a place where the Church was growing the fastest. When Brian dropped out to marry his girlfriend I was as surprised as the Church. Eventually, I realized that the story could be told more completely by several missionaries and that it would be easier to accommodate upheavals and surprises. The Church gave me some more names and I selected two more missionaries who were also going to Guatemala.

WHEN NEWSWEEK'S RELIGION EDITOR KEN WOODWARD VISITED THE MTC HE WAS APPALLED AT ITS REGIMENTATION. WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE?

It was the opposite. I expected a seminary atmosphere—deeply religious people walking quietly around with their heads hanging down. Instead, I walked in the front door and everyone was screaming and yelling and guys were running up and down the hall. I wish I could have filmed that approach and burst into the gym with all the excitement and the college dorm atmosphere. They didn't let me film the living situations of the missionaries, but the feeling was upbeat. I think it's loosened up since Ken Woodward was there.

IS THAT WHY YOU CHOSE THE TABERNACLE CHOIR SINGING "BORN FREE?"

The night that I was scheduled to film the Choir, they sang three songs. The first two were very, very slow religious songs that would have been unusable for television in terms of keeping things alive. There was this burst of energy on "Born Free" that I thought was fabulous. A lot of things that may look intentional were situational, like the ex-Marine mission president who happened to be serving as the head of the mission in Guatemala we visited.

DO YOU THINK YOU SHOWED TOO MUCH OF HELEN WEEKS?

I've been criticized for that. I do think that in the film I should have better connected Helen Weeks to the topic. I should have said that she was the mother of nine and raised five missionaries and was intimately involved with that experience from a mother's standpoint. I didn't make that link. But at the same time I thought she was dynamic and powerful and her voice was important and believable. Also, I wanted to have some women in the film. There are very few women in the film, even though they do make up half the Church. Surprisingly, no one's criticized me for not having more women in the film.

WHAT ABOUT SCOTT MILLER?

I first heard about Scott when someone told me about his SUNSTONE article on the MTC. An amusing thing happened when I was interviewing him at his house in Provo. The police rang the doorbell and wanted to know what was going on. I said we were making a documentary. The policeman told me, "I've been called by the bishop of the local ward because there was some concern that you're making an anti-Mormon film."

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE IN WORKING WITH THE GENERAL AUTHORITIES, ELDER PACKER AND ELDER BALLARD?

It was easy to interview members, they were open. But in the high levels they were very cautious and skirted difficult questions. Elder Packer seemed like a very kind school teacher. I had heard that he was powerful and I expected a stronger presence. After I initially proved myself, they were easy to work with.

Nevertheless, in a way I felt like I was a semi-professional in that they almost saw me like I was a member. Sometimes I felt they wanted to control me as they would a member. I don't know if that is because I'm a woman, but I felt that they were very used to controlling things, including the media and their image.

DID YOU FEEL PRESSURE FROM THE CHURCH?

It was never spoken. Sometimes people from the Public Communications Department followed me in a low-key fashion and would say, "Bobbie, if there's anything I can do to help. . . ." Once in Guatemala when a missionary guide was taking us to these Mormons in the middle of nowhere, driving in a jeep for fourteen hours through the jungle, I turned around, and there's Jerry Cahill following us. I said, "Jerry, what are you doing?" "We're just here to see that things go well," he told me. It was a small village and we were in each other's way, but he left after a day. That time I did feel that I was being watched a little bit.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH'S NEGATIVE RESPONSE TO THE DOCUMENTARY?

Rather than underground rumors, I prefer public statements, like the letter read in Church distancing the institution from the documentary.

Earlier, the Church sent a letter to the KCTS station manager. Here is what I think is the scenario. Beverly Campbell, the Church's Washington, D.C., PR person went to Barry Chase, the PBS vice-president for public affairs programming, and wanted some changes made in the documentary. (PBS President Bruce Christensen, who is a Mormon, appropriately

did not get involved.) I called her to find what her concerns were. The main concern was that it was too negative; that it did not accurately present the positive side of being a missionary, that it just dealt with the two percent who come home early. They also were concerned that I was manipulated by Bob Gottlieb and Peter Wiley, authors of *America's Saints*, and they questioned whether the project's principal underwriter, George D. Smith, had a conflict of interest because he is involved in the Mormon community as a publisher of scholarly works dealing primarily with Mormon subjects. Finally, according to them, there were signs of this influence because these individuals and some people in the film were connected with SUNSTONE.

First, concerning George Smith's involvement. Initially, KCTS, PBS and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting were concerned that this would be a pro-Mormon film. When the PBS underwriting committee examined the projects supported by the George D. Smith Fund, they found a wide variety of quality programs like "NOVA," "The History of the Civilization of the Jews," and the "Vietnam" series, and they were satisfied with sponsorship by the Fund. He complied with the national PBS sponsorship requirements of signing a statement that he could not see the film until it was finished and that he could not participate in the making of the film. In the end, however, the film was judged on its own merits: PBS weighed the final product and decided to broadcast it.

Next, concerning my connection with certain individuals, while I did learn things from these people I learned more from the Church. I spent more time with Arnie Augustin from Church Public Communications than with anyone else. Yes, they did refer me to people, but so did many, many other people. I tried to talk to as many people from the whole spectrum of the Mormon community as I could—missionaries, returned missionaries, stake presidents, apostles, everybody. I asked every single person I talked to who else I should talk to. That's called research. We collect hundreds and hundreds of names and conduct hundreds and hundreds of interviews. So to pick a few people I talked to and see a bias is not accurate.

After PBS stood by the documentary and refused to change it, the Church wrote a letter to KCTS and cited all the "egregious errors" in the publicity materials. They said there were five or six false statements. Prior to airing, KCTS notified all PBS station promotional directors of the errors the Church complained about in the publicity materials. I believe in

some cases they were simply splitting hairs. In two cases there were actual errors. There was an overstatement about Peter Wiley being the author of a best-selling LDS "banned" book, and there was a typographical error that might lead you to believe that black people once could never be members. In addition, we changed "Mormons are *required* to tithe ten percent of their income" to *strongly urged*, and we changed "the Mormon Church has *shunned* the media" to *closely guarded its privacy*.

I think the Church used the publicity errors to make people think that the film itself is full of errors. The film has never been challenged in terms of its overall accuracy. It's been challenged in terms of its balance and its emphasis, but that's different from challenging its facts. The Church sent a second letter and referred to all the connections to SUNSTONE. But no one at KCTS had heard of SUNSTONE. It seemed like they had a conspiracy mentality, similar to McCarthyism in the fifties.

THE FIRST TIME WE AT SUNSTONE DISCUSSED THE DOCUMENTARY WITH ANYONE INVOLVED WITH IT WAS ABOUT TWO MONTHS BEFORE IT AIRED. IN LIGHT OF THE CRITICISM AND WITH HINDSIGHT, DON'T YOU AGREE THAT YOU OVERPLAYED THOSE WHO COME HOME FROM THEIR MISSIONS EARLY?

I can understand why people say that. Church spokesman Don LeFever said that the documentary should have been titled, "The Two Percent Who Fail." But to classify the entire movie on the point that there was no positive RM is diversionary. Journalistic endeavors never reflect a problem to the exact degree that it is present in society. An analogy would be to criticize the media for going on and on about the Iran-Contra affair when it only took two percent of Reagan's time. Since the Church claims two percent of the missionaries do not complete their two years, to explore the issues and complexities of this problem would have been impossible to accomplish in a little over one minute, which is about two percent of a fifty-six minute program.

The Church says that there are 98 percent who complete the program, but no one knows the range of feeling in that 98 percent. The only thing I was trying to do was to find a subject and a point that interested me and that I thought merited going into. In a film you cannot go into anything successfully unless you spend a little time on it. The reason I think the non-Mormon audience thinks it is balanced is that while they're watching it they're not clicking on and off like Mormons are, saying, "Okay, where's the positive RM," et cetera. Rather,

they're sitting back hearing articulate, positive Mormon statements all through the film—doctrine, apostles, and so on. They hear those statements counterbalance the voices of Helen Weeks and Scott Miller. It's an overall impression they're getting; they don't ask whether there's a positive statement by one returned missionary to make everything cool.

STILL, WHEN WE FINISHED WATCHING THE FILM, WE DIDN'T FEEL THAT IT DESCRIBED THE POSITIVE FEELINGS WE EXPERIENCED ON OUR MISSIONS AND WHICH MOST OF THE PEOPLE WE KNOW FELT. WHY DIDN'T YOU HAVE AT LEAST ONE RETURNED MISSIONARY SAY SOMETHING LIKE "ON MY MISSION I FOUND GOD AND LEARNED TO LOVE AND SERVE PEOPLE?"

Nobody said anything to me just like that. It was just the luck of the draw that we didn't film a person who was articulate in the same way. However, I did hear similar comments from Church officials in General Conference talks.

YOU DIDN'T LOOK HARD ENOUGH TO FIND THE AVERAGE MISSIONARY.

That's true, it's easy to find them. I have to say, however, that most people that I found did have some qualifications to the experience, although they felt pretty positive about their missions. I feel that the film more than adequately represents those who felt satisfied with their mission. It includes missionaries at the MTC, missionaries actively serving in the field, and other sympathetic views expressed by an MTC training director, a mission president and other Church authorities. By my count, over 22 people speak in positive and favorable ways about the missionary experience and the Church as a whole.

MOST OF THE ARTICULATE STATE-

MENTS ARE BY MEMBERS WHO HAD A BAD EXPERIENCE; THE OTHERS SEEMED AT TIMES ALMOST BRAINWASHED. THE FILM SEEMED TO IMPLY, "IF YOU HAVE SOMETHING UPSTAIRS YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TROUBLE WITH THE MISSION EXPERIENCE."

If a viewer sees a missionary that way, including those who were hand picked by the Church, that is their opinion; others may not see him the same. In the general explanation of



what missionaries do, I may not have explained the entire positive experience; however, the viewer sees them enthusiastically involved in their mission experience. I think Mormons are over-sensitive on this point. If you ask a non-Mormon audience if this documentary suggests the missionary program is bad, they won't necessarily agree.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE NON-MORMON

RESPONSE TO THE DOCUMENTARY?

In terms of mail, the response has been half for and half against. I am happy there has been such a large response. It's very unusual for a one-hour documentary to get such a large response.

Immediately following the showing of the documentary, KCTS got a lot of calls that all had the same phrases. Let me read some of them. "Is channel 9 owned by the Mormons?" "I do not agree about the Mormon religion, can I have the

name of the producer?" "We help people who used to be in the Mormon church, I feel that airing this program nationwide distorts people." "Do you know the effects of Mormonism? It destroys a lot of people." "I cannot believe that Channel 9 is commercializing this terrible religion."

A distributor of documentary films in New York told me that any time a film approaches balance, which this film tries to do, extremists on either side will see it in opposite ways. Certainly anti-Mormons see it as Mormon propaganda. By the way, KCTS also got a call from a group of Mormon bishops saying they liked it.

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS CRITICIZED THE FILM SAYING IT ASSERTED THAT MORMONS HAVE A "DISREGARD FOR OTHER RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS."

I deny having portrayed Mormons as having little respect for other religions. The NCCJ statement is so inaccurate and misses the subject matter of the film so completely that I have to

wonder about the motivations of the person who made the statement. What ever the disregard of other religions that the Mormon Church may or may not exhibit, this film does not enter into that argument.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE YOUR BIASES?

It's silly to deny that I have biases; everyone does. If I had a bias come through it would be

about the questioning of authority in the Church. I see that as a major difficulty in the Church and there appears to be a struggle on the part of some members in doing it.

WHEN THE FILM'S NARRATOR EXPLAINED WHY PEOPLE JOIN THE CHURCH IT SOUNDED ALMOST LIKE ECONOMIC DETERMINISM. HE DIDN'T EVEN ACKNOWLEDGE SPIRITUAL MOTIVATIONS FOR CONVERSION.

No, the text includes both. The narration says, "Without the missionaries it is doubtful that the Church would grow as fast as it does. People in Guatemala seem to be drawn to the Mormon Church because it is a wealthy and successful North American institution, and they hope this new religion will help them better their lives." Then this guy Martinez comes on and says, "I did many ugly things in my past but in the Church I've changed."

I think in Third World countries where people are very poor, they are impressed by these missionaries who look a lot more prosperous than they are. Yes, I think that some of them join because they think their lives will be economically better. They're not money-hungry people joining the Church, however.

I'm not sure what the people in the Third World get from the missionaries. I don't think they completely understand the religion in the same way the Americans do. But that is another film. This is really a film about the American Church going to proselyte there.

AFTER DOING THIS PROJECT, WHAT ARE YOUR PERSONAL FEELINGS ABOUT THE MISSIONARY PROGRAM?

It's sort of fifty-fifty. I come away feeling that what is impressive about it is also what is bad. On the pro side, a mission seems to be an impressive, powerful experience in terms of living with that kind of discipline at the age of 19, and that is probably a strengthening experience. The con side is that I'm not sure how much thinking goes on during a mission, how much questioning. It just seemed like a lot of memorization and regurgitation and obedience. I wasn't a missionary, so in the end I can't really determine if the pressure to obey outweighs the positive effect of character building.

The goal of the missionary program is to proselyte. Missionaries don't do service—digging wells, and so forth—and for that I am critical of the Church. This is a wonderful opportunity for 30,000 young men to go out into the world. Why couldn't the priority be switched? Have everyone say, "Hey, it really isn't important if you baptize ten people a month. What's important is that you helped

two people." I am aware that there are movements in the Church to have missionaries do more service, but they are not coming through loud and clear to the missionaries. I think that it's the one-true-church message that makes the Church controversial and gives outsiders the perception that Mormons have more power and influence than they actually do. Mormons don't want to appear arrogant, condescending and offensive, but that statement sets off an argumentative stance. Maybe that's why the Church will forever be controversial.

The Mormon religion is a targeted group in American society. That's not the same as prejudice and racism. Targeting is watching you because you're powerful. Sometimes you're targeted unfairly. I doubt that they would have investigated so much if I had been making a Jewish documentary and the underwriter was a Jew. Interestingly, in Guatemala I didn't feel that the Mormon church was this big powerful church. It was just one of many churches.

WHAT ARE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE MORMON CULTURE?

Mormons are a bit on the self-absorbed side. Mormons are preoccupied with themselves. I don't know why. I'm sure part of it is from the geographic base in Utah.

Mormonism is portrayed as monolithic, but the members range from bland to controversial. It's more diverse than I thought it was. Originally, I thought that there was "the Mormon" and I found all kinds of people. Culturally speaking—the arts, songs, literature—I haven't seen a lot of that, and it seems a little void for me. It's the intellectual culture that is the most active.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO DIFFERENTLY NOW? WHAT DIDN'T YOU INCLUDE?

About thirty hours of film. I would have liked to put more of everybody in. Rather than just focus on the missionary effort, I might include more general religious information. I stayed away from the theology and the religiosity issues: what Mormons believe, is there polygamy in heaven? . . . All of that kind of stuff the film could have dealt with.

I have a lot to learn about Mormonism. What I learned in the end was that making social documentary about a religion is a difficult thing. You're treading on delicate things, people's spirituality and beliefs. It wasn't my place to challenge the faith but to look at the culture. I wanted viewers to see that Mormons feel a depth of commitment about their faith. Otherwise they wouldn't be struggling with it, they would have just left. That's why I didn't have an ex-Mormon in the film. That was too easy. That

person left. It's the people who stay in there and struggle that are interesting. That last line in the film where the woman says, "I'm a Mormon because that's what I am. That's what I believe." To me that summed it up: no matter what you think of this religion, there are people who care about it and will stay in it. I hope that people see that in the film and that it's believable. I was trying to talk to two audiences, the non-Mormons and the Mormons, that's part of the problem.

The Church said I was influenced by Gottlieb and Wiley, but the film is entirely different from what they do. There's a review that says their book missed the point because it didn't convey any of the spirituality of Mormonism. In contrast, my work is not about the internal political intrigue of the Church; it's more social and cultural and psychological. I was more interested in the people. To me that's what films are for. One critic said, "Why didn't you make the entire film like the first part, with the neutral narrator stating this and that?" Well, you would have been asleep. I try to make things that will engage people as well as teach them. It's always difficult to show people sitting around being good friends. It's tough to get stuff on film that makes good television.

IN A WRITTEN DOCUMENTARY ALL THE FACTS ARE SYSTEMATICALLY COVERED. HOWEVER, IT SEEMS THAT IN YOUR TELEVISION DOCUMENTARY THE SELECTION WAS INFLUENCED BY WHAT FILM FOOTAGE YOU HAD, "THE LUCK OF THE DRAW," AND WHAT WAS ENTERTAINING. IS THAT GOOD REPORTING?

That's an unfair question. Film is different because in an hour's time you're only able to convey two or three ideas. Television is in the predicament of balancing content and form. Even in the world of non-profit television, we have to make compelling television people will watch. If the film was real bland, no one would talk about it. I see the television documentary as a mirror to get people thinking and talking. My documentary succeeds because it doesn't bore people and it doesn't tell them in a heavy-handed way what to think. As a filmmaker I try to set the issue in a concrete way so that the viewer can decide. Some documentaries have a lot of heavy narration that tells people what to think. I try to lessen that in my documentaries, and that makes them more unsettling. I want the people who are living through the subject matter of the film to tell their own story. This film tried to raise some issues and some problems. Whether it did that fairly is for other individuals to decide.

1987 WASHINGTON SUNSTONE SYMPOSIUM

CONFERENCE AUDIO TAPES

RECORDED LIVE MAY 15-16 - WASHINGTON, D.C.

TAPE #	TITLE	TAPE#	TITLE
1 & 2	THE LAW OF CONSECRATION Cook, May, Mangum, Card, Peck	15	COUNTER CAPITALISM May
3	AT THE EPICENTER Roberts, Sillitoe, Throckmorton	16	HEALING PRACTICES/19TH CENT. Bush
4	THE ANGUISH OF FAITH Hunsaker	17	BIO-GENETIC DETERMINISM Moench
5	THE MORMON POLYGAMY CASE Guynn, Schaerr	18	"ON LIBERATING GOD" Hunsaker
6	ESSAYS BY MARY L. BRADFORD EASTER WEEKEND, Bradford, England	19	THE BENJAMIN/NOAH NEXUS Larsen
7	BOOK OF MORMON - 19th CENTURY FICTION Hutchinson, Prince	21	DOCTRINE OF LITTLE CHILDREN Cook
8	TRANSCEDENT EXPERIENCE Koltko	22	CELESTIAL MARRIAGE England
9	REDEMPTION OF EVE/NEW MORMON HEAVEN Rockwood, Charles	23	LITERARY WORLD CREATION Scott Card
10	CONFLICTING GOALS/ELKTON WARD STUDY Molen, Bushman, Breglio	26	MORMON CHAPEL ARCHITECTURE Chandler, Roberts, Molen, Reed
11	CHALLENGE OF EXCELLENCE Bennion, Orman, Boswell, Sayer	27	DOCUMENTS, STONES AND SYMBOLS BIBLICAL PROPHETIC TRADITION Sandberg, Lindgren
12	CHURCH IN 1980's Various	28	MY LIFE WITH DIALOGUE England MONOLOGUES & DIALOGUES Reese
13	CAN A MORMON BE A TRUE ARTIST Prince, Argetsinger, Withers, Card		THE VIEW FROM THE BASEMENT Bradford
14	LDS WOMAN AT HOME & BEYOND Smith	30	WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN Bennion

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