

ANXIOUSLY ENGAGED . . .

STRENGTHENING THE PART-MEMBER MARRIAGE?
WE'RE JUST FINE, THANK YOU

By Jana Riess

OH, THAT'S TOO bad," exclaimed the widowed sister missionary, her mouth arranged in a slight frown and her eyebrows puckered with concern. "I am so sorry." From her tone, you'd think that someone had died. But I had just casually mentioned that my husband is not a Latter-day Saint, but a Methodist, and would not be accompanying me on a planned trip to the temple to be baptized for my ancestors. For her, it may have been the death of a dream, one neatly tied up with the white satin bow of a temple wedding. For me, it was a simple statement about my marriage.

I'm not married to a "non-member," mind you. I refuse to use that term. ("This is my husband," goes that introduction. "You know, the non-entity.") I am always very careful to refer to my husband as a Methodist, the religion he chose while in high school. Every week, he plays the piano for his church, engages in the team of life in his small congregation, and prays with his friends in the praise band. Then he comes home and makes grilled cheese sandwiches so they'll be hot off the griddle when our daughter, Jerusha, and I return from the LDS ward we attend.

This careful dance that we do is ever complicated, but always joyful. Before we had Jerusha, things were in one sense easier. Phil attended church with me pretty often—so often, in fact, that some of the missionaries quite readily assumed that he was LDS and referred to him as "Brother Riess." (We laughed about that being wrong on both counts, since we have different last names.) But shortly after Jerusha was born, Phil assumed the pianist's job at his church, a responsibility that demands his presence early

every Sunday morning. We've made serious efforts to give her a grounding in both traditions, beginning with her blessing ceremony. When she was six weeks old, we arranged a private "naming and dedication" ritual for her. Phil's pastor and my bishop both gave blessings, we sang hymns from both traditions, and the room was full of people from both of our churches. It was, I think, a beautiful evening, full of everyone's hopes for a daughter whose very name means "inheritance."

Things have gotten a bit more complicated. Sundays are a logistical struggle, but we have settled into a routine where Jerusha usually comes to church with me. We used to alternate taking her each week, but as she grew older, we found that this was too disruptive for her and that it was too difficult for Phil to entertain her when he was practicing with the band in the two hours before the worship service. So we are currently raising our little girl as a Mormon, though this is more a result of logistical realities than a conscious theological decision.

Our interdenominational marriage (Phil doesn't call it "interfaith" because we are both Christian) forces us to communicate openly about our desires and our disagreements. We talk openly, not in order to change the other person's point of view, but simply to understand our different perspectives. It has been a challenge to try to teach fellow Mormons that I am not interested in converting my husband and that I don't want them to attempt it, either. Some don't quite know how to respond, and I try to explain that fundamentally, I do not believe a strong and vibrant marriage can be built upon a foundation of one partner's desiring

the other to change. This is not to say that I never nag my husband to stop snoring or do a few loads of laundry; I'm talking about *deep* change, the kind that a true religious conversion requires. A convert to Mormonism, I know the almost molecular transformation that my decision required of me. I was able to make those changes because I knew at my core that God was calling me, that for some reason I was supposed to become a saint of the latter days. If my husband were to convert to any religion, I would expect his level of commitment to be no less than this.

And so we try to be supportive of each other. Phil, in fact, has sometimes been the catalyst for me to be a better and more observant Mormon. When he stopped reading the Sunday papers on Sunday because he felt he was getting sucked into the advertising flyers and was coveting too many new gadgets, I realized that on the Sabbath, I, too, dream too much about consumerism. Now, my Sunday travel pages wait until Monday. And when I had a very difficult experience at the temple when I received my endowments, Phil comforted me and encouraged me to go again. He held me in the night as I cried and told him what little I could about what had bothered me about that first experience. I have heeded his advice and returned to the temple, feeling stronger and more blessed with each session.

And so our marriage, now eleven years strong, waxes on. I have at times felt insulted by tactless comments of others at church, but far more often I have had positive experiences and sensed that members of my ward have readily looked past Phil's scarlet "G" (for Gentile) to see the loving and kind person he is. Many have reached out to know him for his own sake, not in the hope that he might prove to be that elusive "golden contact." When I was scheduled to be set apart as the Gospel Doctrine teacher, my bishop made a point of waiting a week until a time when



JANA RIESS is the Gospel Doctrine teacher in the Winchester, Kentucky ward. She has a Ph.D. in American religious history from Columbia University and is the Religion Book Review Editor for *Publisher's Weekly*. She is the author of *The Spiritual Traveler: Boston and New England* and is currently at work on a book about the spiritual themes

in the television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

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Jana Riess, Phil Smith, and Jerusha Riess-Smith at Legoland, in Carlsbad, California, 2001.

Phil could be present for the blessing. I thanked the bishop for this courtesy, but he made light of it, saying, "Of course. Phil is part of the family." He did not mean my family, but our ward family. I deeply appreciate that.

That's not to say that we haven't had problems educating people in both of our churches. This past summer, we had a surprising and unfortunate experience when his congregation (then between pastors) hired an outside speaker to teach an eight-week course on cults. Phil attended the first class and came home upset, telling me that the teacher had singled out Mormonism for special attention and put forth all manner of sensationalist statements about what Mormons purportedly believe. He was very discouraged, as was I. He announced that he would not be returning to church until the class had ended—a major inconvenience for everyone, since they needed to find an interim musician—and then wrote a letter to the church explaining the reason for his temporary absence. He was particularly irritated by the very narrow definition of Christianity put forward in the class. "By his [the teacher's] standards, I am pretty sure that I'm not considered a Christian either," he said in the letter. Although several of our friends attended the classes and seemed to accept wholesale what the teacher was saying about Mormonism and other "cults," a number of people approached us privately to express support or ask questions about what

Mormons really believe. In all, it was a good opportunity for mutual understanding, though it was also quite painful to realize that some of our Protestant friends were—and are—walking around with highly inaccurate opinions about my religion.

On the flip side, I'm also surprised by how many stereotypes Mormons have about Protestants—many of which are simply wrong. Earlier this year in Relief Society, I found myself in the odd position of Protestant Defender as one sister claimed that no members of other churches pay tithing (ridiculous), and another asserted that Protestant churches have enormous, well-paid staffs and even pay their musicians (also generally untrue, and certainly untrue in our case). There seems to be this enduring and rather preposterous idea that Protestant churches are set up to enrich their pastors and suck money from the faithful. As someone who graduated from a Protestant seminary, and who has numerous friends serving in parishes, I feel the responsibility to tell my ward members that it just ain't so; nobody's getting rich except those folks you see on cable TV. I would also like Mormons to recognize that our tithe paying differs only in method from the way other churches make offerings. Just because we send our money to a centralized organization that then redistributes some of that money back to us, the dynamic of supporting our church is the same one that supports religious institutions everywhere. They are built with the re-

sources of the faithful, whether on a very personalized and local basis or through a more corporate and organized system.

And so Phil and I continue on with the "part-member marriage." Nomenclature remains a surprisingly stubborn problem. As I've mentioned, I find the term "non-member" to be particularly odious, since it divides the world all too neatly into those who belong to the club and those who don't. And although some have joked good-naturedly about Elder Ballard's suggestion that we refer to non-members as "neighbors" ("Won't you be my neighbor?" I asked Phil), it is a step in the right direction. Such a term envisions a world that is not partitioned into realms of insiders and outsiders but thrives on networks of interdependence and mutual submission. We Mormons live in a world in which we are called to treat all people as neighbors, with all of the loving concern and personal involvement that such a term suggests. I am not at all sorrowful that my home has become a living laboratory of interdenominational neighborliness. In contrast to what the sister missionary implied on that day nearly a decade ago, I find my situation to be one rich with opportunities for increased love, communication, and mutual understanding. And that is never "too bad." ☺



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