

SPIRITUAL PATHS AFTER SEPTEMBER 1993

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During September 1993, six high-profile LDS scholars and feminists were excommunicated or, in one case, disfellowshipped, for apostasy. The disciplinary actions against the “September Six,” as they came to be called, received national news attention, including a front page story in the *New York Times* and a report on National Public Radio with comments from Elder Dallin H. Oaks. Many observers believed the September Six were victims of an orchestrated “purge” intended to enforce orthodoxy in the Church. LDS officials denied that local Church leaders had been instructed to discipline these members, but they also affirmed the importance of preserving purity of doctrine and keeping wolves from entering the flock.

The September 1993 excommunications were traumatic not only for the six individuals themselves but also for other Latter-day Saints who saw themselves as having feminist or liberal leanings, or a questioning or intellectual temperament. Was there still a place for such Saints in the Church? What were the perils of participating in independent Mormon forums such as *Sunstone*? That many Saints identified strongly with the September Six can be seen from the candlelight vigils held outside stake centers, the two hundred people who gathered for a prayer service during the midst of the controversy, or the one thousand white roses delivered to General Authorities as a symbolic plea for reconciliation.

Eventually, the term “September Six” came to evoke, for many, the disciplining of other prominent Mormon intellectuals in subsequent years and the dismissals of certain professors during academic freedom controversies at BYU. Lionized as heroic figures by some and viewed as dangerous malcontents by others, the September Six have become a symbol for the troubled relationship between the institutional Church and some of its more independently minded members.

On 14 August 2003, the Salt Lake *Sunstone* Symposium featured a panel discussion that brought five of the September Six together to report on the spiritual paths they have taken during the decade since September 1993. (The sixth, conservative Biblical scholar Avraham Gileadi, has declined to participate in events protesting or memorializing the September 1993 actions and is the only one to date to have been rebaptized.) Have the other five negotiated new relationships with the Church? Have they found other spiritual homes? Ultimately, their remarks cast light on the question: What happens when personal spirituality and institutional affiliation are disrupted?