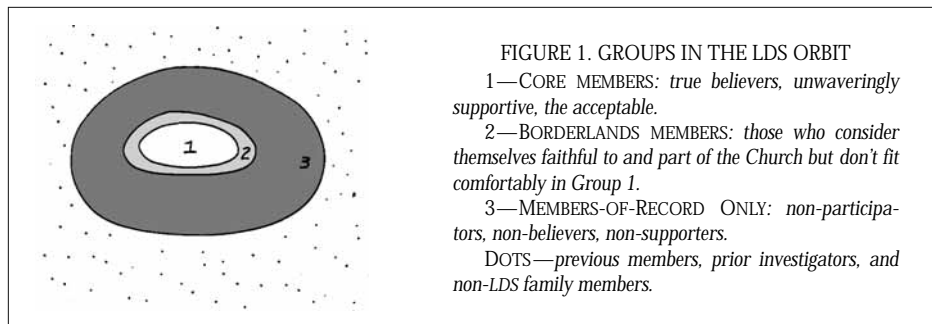


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

DIVORCE

By D. Jeff Burton



THIS COLUMN EXPLORES the stories of Borderlanders¹ in order to share ways other Latter-day Saints have successfully (or unsuccessfully) dealt with problems and challenges—in this case, divorce.

Readers who have endured a divorce know the extreme trauma, the deep losses, and the incredible suffering on many levels of all concerned. In addition to the emotional upheaval accompanying most divorces, because ours is such a family-oriented church, divorced Latter-day Saints often experience additional stress: a feeling of marginalization and alienation from their Church family. There is of course no way to measure such marginalization with any precision, but I wouldn't be at all surprised to hear most divorced Mormons say that during and following their divorce, they felt in many ways as if they were in the Borderlands (as we have defined it in this column) or beyond.

The following are excerpts from the stories of several divorced Latter-day Saints who have written to me. The authors have agreed to have their stories published, but names and some details have been changed to protect their identities, and the texts have been edited for clarity and brevity.

IN a previous column, I presented a set of questions readers could answer to describe their experiences in the Borderlands. "Mike" submitted the following responses:

How would you describe your upbringing in the Church?

I was born under the covenant and went to church on a regular basis. I graduated from seminary in high school and went on a terrific mission. I married a returned sister missionary in the temple and have held almost every position in the Church except bishop and beyond.

What issues/events/actions/concerns led to your move into the "Borderlands"?

I was among the Group 1 "acceptable" category until I went through a divorce. Up to that time, I would condemn those who were divorced as weak and irresponsible. Now I know that divorce can happen to anyone because, as narrow-minded as this may sound, I got divorced.

The Church as a whole does not seem to have a place for those who are single, divorced, children of divorced parents, remarried, or have blended families. As a single, divorced person, I received very little help from the Church. Many times the help I received was well-intentioned but not helpful. Comments such as, "Divorce is too easy" are all too common and uninformed. Divorce is hard, very hard.

Many children of divorced parents and blended families have little in common with "normal" Group 1 families. When people at church talk about a father's blessing or the Proclamation on the Family, children from broken homes will

often feel a lot of grief.

Gossip is everywhere in a typical ward, and it is a big issue with divorced people. Cruel things are said about both parties. My children were exposed to many hurtful rumors at church.

I attended a singles' fireside once in which a woman (who would be going home to her children and husband) gave a wonderful talk on the gospel. Then at the very end, she criticized us for complaining about being lonely and for having all the problems we deal with. Citing Moroni, the last Nephite survivor, she said he never complained about being alone. This well-intentioned sister demonstrated the obvious—that people in a family church do not often understand nor accept single people.

What is your current status in the Church?

I attend church with my new wife. She would like to be sealed in the temple some day, but I have told her I cannot promise this yet. I live the Word of Wisdom. I have not yet started paying tithing again, but my wife does. I support my wife in all her callings and activity. I am friendly with my ward members and neighbors and feel they are good people.

How did/does all this affect you?

I feel a real loss—the "only true church on earth" is not as wise in all of its programs and policies as I once believed it was. All through my life, I used the Church as a rudder. But now I see that although the Church teaches good values and ethics, the people of the Church sometimes promote bias and intolerance towards those of us who do not fit the mold.

At times, I feel angry at certain Church policies. Here's an example: One of my siblings and her second husband went through the temple and were sealed for time and eternity. She had a son from a previous marriage, and the husband did, too. Both boys were at the temple for the ceremony. The couple also had two younger children from their own civil marriage.

The two older boys were asked to wait in the foyer while the two younger children were sealed to

D. JEFF BURTON is an author and a member of the Sunstone Board of Directors.

their parents following the solemnizing of their celestial marriage. (The older boys were sealed to the couple's former spouses.) The older boys wondered why they were not part of this new celestial family? They felt they were being left out and were hurt by not being included in the ceremony. They were visibly angry and upset.

I questioned the couple about why the boys were left out, and they said it was Church policy not to allow them to be sealed when they were already sealed to someone else. My feeling is that if everything is going to be "sorted out in Heaven," then what harm would it have caused had the older boys been allowed to be sealed along with the younger two siblings? As it stands now the older boys feel like they are not part of this new family, that they are on the outside.

How did/do you cope with those issues/events/concerns?

Did I say I was coping? I am still in transition; I am trying to come to terms with something I understood to be truth and wisdom. I am trying to fill the void where I once thought I knew where my destiny lay. My friends I grew up with are bishops, stake presidents, high council members. I, too, thought I would live a life of service and leadership within the Church of God. Not now.

How open/honest are you with others about your situation?

I am honest and open to the point of being outspoken. Unfortunately, my bishop, when he interviewed me recently, got an earful of how I felt about things, including the Church.

How did/does all this affect your family/spouse/children/parents/friends?

I have made some new friends and have lost some old ones. My new wife would like to see me become more active and attend all the meetings with her. My son who is on a mission doesn't quite know what to do with me. I send money and support along with encouragement. It is a mixed bag of new acceptance and rejection.

How have various people (e.g., spouse, ward members) responded?

One positive response was when my stepdaughter came home from church one day and said that in Primary, they asked who was from a blended family. Everyone pointed to her. Then the teacher went on to say that the first blended family in the Church was Jesus Christ's, because Joseph was not Jesus's father.

What does your personal religion look like now?

I consider myself a Mormon in transition, and I try not to feel antagonistic toward the Church. I feel a need to crusade for better understanding in the Church of divorced men and women and others who don't fit the "acceptable" mold.

What would you like the Church to do about it?

After I got married the second time, I needed support in blending my new family. The Church offers very little information on how to do this. All the rules change when blending a family. The father usually is not the head of *the* family, only the head of *his* family, if and when he gets to have contact with his children.

The Church should foster support groups for those of us who have unique situations, such as blended families. Leaders and members should be more sensitive to the needs of those who may not fall into the traditional family definition.

The following message was sent to me from "Jared":

Although I've been in the Borderlands for a long time, my first wife was the model of the Group 1 member—right in the center. Seven years ago, when our divorce proceedings began, I lost my job, and I developed health problems.

Fortunately I later remarried someone whose outlook on religion and the Church are more in line with my liberal views. After many discussions and arguments and even thoughts of joining another religion, we decided that this Church was still the best for all for us. So we've stayed, at least in the Borderlands.

We do exactly what you suggested in your last column on honesty (SUNSTONE, March 2005). When asked, we explain that we

are not "orthodox" and that we feel comfortable where we are. And we're honest about things.

But we are purposely vague about the details of what we believe and what we don't, explaining that we don't want to get into that, particularly because I am likely to give a slightly different answer every day of the week. I occasionally get up in testimony meetings and say words almost exactly like what you suggested—how we love the Church and the people. I concluded my last testimony with, "I know, I know, this is a pretty darned good church." I was roundly complimented afterward.

I could not have carried this off without my new wife, who is in the same spiritual boat as I am. Everyone loves her.

I never thought this could happen, but we seem accepted and involved (except we have no callings which require a temple recommend). We go willingly, almost every Sunday.

One of our daughters received her patriarchal blessing last Sunday, and the patriarch just gushed about how spiritual she is and what a good job we have done with her. He said this even after my wife and I had been open with him about our "Borderland" status.

So this is working out quite well. The bishop occasionally challenges us to get temple recommends, saying how they could really use us in other callings. And I truthfully tell him we are thinking about it. So, in other words, honesty is appreciated, especially if you make it clear that you want to stay in the Church, and love it and the people, but are just struggling with historical or doctrinal matters, and so forth. My advice to others who are struggling: *Don't throw away the baby with the bathwater.*

The following note came from "Robert": I was serving on my stake's high council when my wife announced that she was filing for divorce and wanted me to move out—"right away."

I moved to an adjacent ward in the same stake in order to be near my teenaged kids. It was only a few

weeks later that I was released from the high council with a “hearty vote of thanks.” Although I maintained my temple recommend and (sometimes sporadic) attendance for the next few years, I was not asked to serve in any real position in my new ward. A divorced and un-re-married man is never considered worthy of important positions. (Or at least so I observe.)

Following my divorce, I found my former ward and stake friends somewhat distant and formal. (I had been quite well known in my stake.) They didn’t really know how to deal with me, except on a somewhat stilted basis. “Hello. How have you been? Well, good to see you again. I hope everything is all right. I’ve got to go. Let me know if there is anything I can do. Bye.”

Although nothing was said directly to me, I know there was talk around my old home ward wondering what I must have done to trigger a divorce. I didn’t try to defend myself or explain anything. My wife didn’t talk about it either except (as one member told me) to say, “He’s a good dad, but it just wasn’t working out.” I didn’t explain either because, frankly, I didn’t really know all the reasons myself.

I don’t know how my wife experienced church as a divorcee, but it must not have been all that rewarding because after a couple of years, she moved away, fell into inactivity, and eventually left the Church.

As amazing as it may seem, I came to feel that I had to be careful talking to married women in my stake. Some men seemed to be nervous that I would speak with their wives, and some women seemed nervous that in speaking to me, they might be perceived as showing an interest in me, or worse. I learned never to speak to a woman unless other people were present and included in the conversation, or were at least within easy earshot of our conversation. I learned never to touch any woman in the ward—no hugs, no handshakes, nothing. I’ve heard divorced women say the same things, only in reverse.

My (mostly unconsidered) testimony faltered. What I had routinely believed and accepted (or, mostly ignored) now seemed questionable. In my new circumstances, I was able to be more curious and honest with myself about what I really thought about the Church, its history, and its people. The old constraints—belonging to the group, satisfying group expectations, filling important leadership positions, being too busy—no longer interfered with my evaluation of what was actually happening to me in my Church experience.

I became interested in Church history, policies, and other curious matters with which I had had no time in my old life to think about or explore. I still appreciate the Church but in different ways now.

The Sunstone community became something like my “ward.” Dan Wotherspoon in some ways became my “bishop.”

Although I hardly knew anyone at Sunstone, really, I felt a kinship and connection to others in the Borderlands. I’ve remarried and am active again, but I still cling to Sunstone as an important emotional and intellectual support.

THESE three Borderland stories likely sound familiar to most of us. There are consistent threads running through all such stories: a feeling of being isolated and alone, of not being understood or receiving sufficient help from Church members, of feeling estranged from and unacceptable to Group 1 members, of needing but not receiving organizational help, and of losing previous beliefs or faith in God and the Church (temporarily or permanently).

A. Dean Byrd recently wrote in the *Ensign* about the problems facing divorced men. One paragraph states:

Many divorced men report experiencing a deep sense of personal failure and feel they have lost everything important to them. This sense of loss is frequently manifested by anxiety, depression, and guilt. Men are less likely to ask for or receive emotional support. Frequently others automatically assume the man is responsible for the divorce, particularly if he does not have custody of the children.

Though the gospel offers many wonderful resources, some Church settings may seem awkward both for the brother who is divorced and for other members of the ward.²

In this article, Byrd makes the usual good suggestions of prayer, fasting, and seeking help from bishops, quorum leaders, and home teachers. He also suggests that divorced men should remain heavily involved in their children’s lives, be realistic about finances, repent if their actions have contributed to the divorce, and forgive everybody involved.

He also suggests that members can be helpful if they will:

- Ask the divorced member how they can be helpful.
- Help the divorced member feel included in the ward.
- Avoid judging the divorced member; leave that to the Lord.
- Be supportive of the member’s efforts to find healing.
- Reach out, welcome, and love as the Savior would.
- Be willing to listen if the member wants to talk.
- Pray for inspiration to know how to help the divorced member.

Using the three stories presented in this column as a barometer, I’d say all of these points are wonderful advice.

NOTES

1. In the first “Braving the Borderlands” column (this is the sixteenth), I introduced the Borderland member as one who may have an unusual but LDS-compatible outlook on life; a distinctive way of thinking about faith, belief, and testimony; a different view of LDS history; some open questions about a particular aspect of the Church; reduced or modified activity, or feelings of not meeting Group 1 acceptability criteria. See the figure.

2. A. Dean Byrd, “After Divorce: Help for Latter-day Saint Men,” *Ensign*, August 2003, 58–61.

Please send me any of your experiences or tales from life in the Borderlands.

*D. Jeff Burton
2974 So. Oakwood Dr.
Bountiful, Utah 84010
jeff@eburton.com*