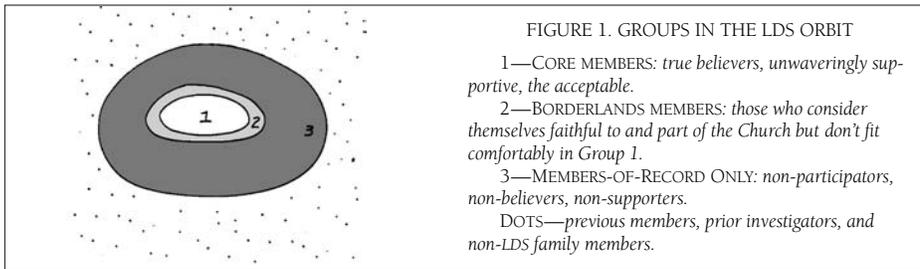


BRAVING THE BORDERLANDS . . .

A 2020 CALL

By D. Jeff Burton



THERE IS A saying to the effect that rich men feel no temptation to steal bread. In a similar way, well-positioned men serving at the local level sometimes feel no temptation to question the system that grants them power nor to really consider their true feelings and beliefs. Many Borderlanders have had this experience, myself included.¹

I would like to share with you a story that dovetails nicely with this experience and with the major theme of this magazine devoted to women's issues.

A 2020 CALL

THE DOOR OPENED slowly into an office suite in the Church Administration Building in Salt Lake City. The security escort waved a farewell. "Nice to have known you folks," he said with a smile. Responding to his visitors' blank looks, he said more seriously, "Men are never the same after they receive a call from this office."

R. Grant Ellison and his wife Anna stepped hesitantly into a spacious outer office. The deep carpet and wool-lace curtains from an earlier era framed large wooden windows overlooking the flower-covered plaza outside.

Darkened oil paintings of early Church leaders hung heavily on the south wall while glass cases on the east displayed an original of the Book of Mormon and other early-Church documents. Light from the ancient cases cast a warm incandescent yellow glow on the wall behind. The office had been remodeled six years ago as part of many

changes in the Church then and was presently lit by a blue-white laser chandelier. In Grant's mind, the new light clashed uncomfortably with the old. "I'll take the traditional any time," he thought.

The receptionist smiled and disappeared through a small door. Grant waited quietly, his faithful wife and companion at his side. Tall, handsome, muscular but sagging, graying at the temples, and dressed in a tailored, dark gray suit, he looked much like a bank president or congressman.

A large double door opened, and a gentle, elderly man shuffled through. Grant had never been in the man's immediate presence before but quickly recognized the distinguished, ninety-six-year-old president and prophet of the Church, now 32 million members strong. Grant's legs stiffened, and his cheeks flushed. He took Anna's arm, knowing that she'd be needing his support.

Sensing the tension, the president spoke in a soft, reassuring tone. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I've been looking forward to seeing you. Please, come in." He grasped the Ellisons' arms, separating them, then putting his thin hands at their waists, he gently led them into his inner office toward three high-backed chairs beside his large, glass-topped desk. Directly in front of the desk was a dark leather chair obviously used for ordinations and blessings.

The prophet asked them to turn their chairs so they all could face each other. Their knees were only inches apart, their chairs forming a perfectly equal triangle on the soft carpet. He smiled. His well-known, weathered face and white hair were even more

striking in person.

"President Ellison, we've watched you and Sister Ellison for a number of years now. We know of your accomplishments, devotion to the gospel, and unquestioning support of the leadership of the Church." He paused. "We have something to suggest to you and Sister Ellison."

Nervous but excited, Grant wiped his now-damp hands together. This has to be a call to be an Authority of some kind, he thought. He had served as a bishop, a stake president, a mission president in Germany, and was now a full-time Church leader and employee in London. Anna had served faithfully at his side, becoming a recognized leader in her own right. She was serving on the Relief Society General Board, looking after its interests in the British Isles. She had also become a Director of the UN's Office of International Understanding, a position of considerable visibility in the U.K. She was a real asset to Grant in his increasingly important callings in the Church.

The president continued. "Sister Ellison, will you support your husband in any position we call him to?" She responded without hesitation. "Of course." She sat erect in her chair, her smile serene and pleasant. Her hair was immaculate, her British clothes cut just right, and her hands rested calmly in her trim lap.

Everyone smiled.

"Brother Ellison, will you support your wife in any position we may call her to?" Grant said, "Why . . . yes . . . certainly." He had heard that some calls were introduced like this.

"Well, I have a proposal for you," he said. "Last month it was suggested to the First Presidency that another person be called into the general leadership of the Church. We have discussed this call with the Twelve. They are in harmony with what we propose to do." The prophet searched in his coat pocket for a sheet of paper. The very air in that spacious inner office seemed electric. Grant leaned forward a little.

The prophet read carefully from the paper: "Anna Kandell Ellison, it is proposed that you be called to the position of Church Ambassador to Europe. This calling reports directly to the First Presidency." He paused and looked at Grant: "Brother R. Grant Ellison, it is proposed that you be released from any present callings to support your good wife. She's going to need your strength, your love, your experience, and your priesthood."

Everyone exchanged glances. Concerned for her husband's feelings, Anna looked at

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him closely. Grant slumped slightly and looked blankly at the prophet.

The president's kind voice loosened the tension: "No need to answer just yet. You'll both need to think a little about it, I'm sure. Perhaps a little background information will help you understand the importance of this call." He leaned over and touched a button on his desk. "Michael, please ask J. Lynn Maynard to join us." Turning to the Ellisons, he continued, "Lynn is one of my assistants and can do a good job of explaining how the idea for this call came about."

Grant leaned back, folded his arms on his chest, and choked down a cough. His gaze wandered about the room, finally fixing on an early photograph on the president's desk of the prophet and his beloved wife. She was clinging to the president's arm, looking lovingly into his face. "That's the way things *should* be," Grant thought.

J. Lynn Maynard entered holding a thin lapscreen. She was well prepared for her presentation, which she supported with graphs and charts. "As you know," she began, "the world and the Church have changed a great deal during the second decade. We've become more of a diverse, faith-based religion, one more centered at the local level on Jesus's teachings.

"Partly as a result, just since 2012, we've seen great growth in developed countries such as Japan, Canada, and the U.K. The Church's increased influence in Europe is also being noticed by many ecclesiastical and government leaders, requiring our greater attention and. . . ."

Maynard pushed on smoothly through her presentation, but Grant was not listening very closely. "Why me, God?" he prayed silently. He imagined himself following Anna into church and government buildings and being introduced as "Ambassador Ellison's husband." He saw himself "warming up" smiling Church members while they patiently waited for Anna K. Ellison to take the podium. He imagined waiting for her in hotel rooms while she attended important meetings and then hearing her say, "I'm sorry, but what we discussed is confidential. I can't say anything just yet." He choked on that thought.

Where would his life go now? His Church career, whatever was left of it, would be overshadowed by Anna's position. He would have to defer to her needs instead of she to his. His unspoken dream of rising to greater and greater service was turning into a nightmare, plummeting into obscurity. He had a sudden urge to jump up, escape the room, and quit the Church. This last shocking thought—

impossible only moments ago despite years of unspoken questions and secret personal concerns—shook Grant like blue-sky thunder and his attention flashed back to Sister Maynard.

" . . . and so we've found the new Church Ambassadorship position to be an excellent bridge to leaders around the world," Maynard continued. "It's opened many doors and helped us solve many problems. Ambassador Ellison will be the third Ambassador called."

The prophet smiled. "They haven't accepted yet." He thanked Sister Maynard and invited her to chat for a moment with Anna. Standing, he took Grant by the arm, moving him to the windows overlooking the plaza. Through the imperfect old glass, they could see people passing just outside, some intently heading for the temple, others for the City Creek complex, others seemingly with no destination in mind. None knew what was happening only feet away.

Brother Ellison, do you believe that God is making this call?"

The question hit Grant's mind like water on a hot griddle. "Do I?" he wondered.

The prophet immediately continued. "My years of associating with leaders tell me you're having a problem. Am I right?"

Grant knew he should say, "No, I'm fine. I'd love to support Anna. I'm overjoyed at her call. I'll do whatever is required to see her succeed. I know this is the best for the Church. I know the call is inspired. This isn't about me." Those thoughts were there, but they were swimming with a lot of other, more negative, selfish, and doubtful feelings that Grant suddenly recognized openly. He knew how perceptive the prophet was. He would feel Grant's insincerity if he said what he "should." Best to be honest, Grant told himself. About five seconds of silence had passed.

"Well, President, it's not going to be easy, that's true. It's such a change. It's not that I don't want this for Anna, it's just that . . . well, pride might be one of my problems, and . . . uh . . . it's going to be rough being in the shadows, out of the decision making . . . not being 'Number One,' not being in charge . . . taking direction from a woman. . . . I'm sorry. Honestly, I've been hoping for something like this for myself for years . . . and now it seems. . . . Frankly, I just don't know what to think."

"Brother Ellison, thank you for being honest with me. This is hard, I know. You're not the only one who's experienced these kinds of feelings, believe me," he said with gentleness and love. "You saw the photo of

my sweet eternal companion and me on the desk. I keep that special picture close to remind me that we are all equal in the sight of God, that we must trust Him, and that we must be honest with one another.

"That picture was taken on a Sunday afternoon many years ago. She had just been called to the Relief Society General Board, a tremendous opportunity, one requiring a lot of support and sacrifice on my part. I was released as the president of an elder's quorum," he chuckled. "I felt some of the same emotions you are probably feeling right now—frustration, doubt and concern; wondering what was going to happen to me. And it took me months to overcome those feelings and to let myself be honest with myself, and with others. But it's my testimony that such feelings can be overcome and must be overcome if we are to achieve happiness in this life and exaltation in the next."

Grant nodded, not quite satisfied, not quite understanding, but somehow hopeful now. They walked back to the desk.

"Sister Anna K. Ellison, can you accept this call from the Lord?"

"I can, with Grant's blessing."

"Fine. And you, Brother R. Grant Ellison, can you accept a new calling, that of supporting and sustaining Ambassador Anna K. Ellison?"

"Yes, I'll give it my best."

"The Lord will help. I'd like you to join me as I set apart Sister Ellison. Then I'd like to lay my hands on your head and give you a special blessing, that you will be able to accept your new role and to understand its importance to the Church, to Sister Ellison, and to yourself.

"Sister Ellison, if you'll come forward." ☪

NOTE

1. In my first column (this is the twenty-sixth), 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. Copies of previous columns are available via free download at WWW.FORTHOSEHOWONDER.COM.

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

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