

A Peacemaker

HOW ONE PENTECOSTAL PASTOR TAUNTS



er in Provo

HT HIS CONGREGATION TO LOVE MORMONS.

by Dean Merrill

DEAN JACKSON RECALLS HIS CHILDHOOD DAYS of traveling with his missionary parents to donor churches during furlough. "Night after night, my father would describe our ministry in Japan, and then at the end of the service, I'd watch people shaking his hand. This was the late sixties, and beefy veterans of World War II would come up and say, 'Well, Brother Jackson, I suppose it's a good thing that somebody goes and tells them dirty Japs about the Lord.' If I heard that phrase once growing up, I must have heard it 50 times."

The young Jackson was hard-pressed to reconcile the comments of those American Christians with the world he knew in the Far East. "I met a lot of wonderful people—but I never met a 'dirty Jap.'" The Jacksons made friends with neighbors, business people, and civic leaders—Buddhists and Christians alike—finding them most often to be gracious and intelligent.

In time Jackson followed his father's footsteps into the Assemblies of God ministry. After serving churches in Amarillo, Texas, and Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he came in 1991 to a setting almost as foreign and cross-cultural as the Japanese mission field: Provo, Utah.

It has been said that while Salt Lake City may be the head of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the heart lies 35 miles south in Provo, where Mormons make up 94 percent of the population. This city is home to Brigham Young University (BYU)—less than a mile from Jackson's modest church, Rock Canyon Assembly. You cannot drive the tidy streets without noticing well-known Mormon names: yard markers for "Osmond Real Estate," signs pointing to the 23,000-seat Marriott Center arena on the BYU campus. The impressive Missionary Training Center swarms with a new batch of 5,000 young men every three weeks, gearing up for their two years of door-to-door service to the church.

There are no slums, and only one liquor store for 100,000 residents. Few restaurants open on Sundays. The city virtually shuts down on Monday night: it's "Family Home Evening."

The Provo phone book lists but one Catholic and only 15 Protestant churches for the whole city; most have attendance below 100. Meanwhile, the listing of 158

photograph by
Gaylon Wampler

different Mormon “wards” takes up nearly five columns in the White Pages. (The average ward has 250 worshippers.) The BYU listings take up another five columns.

Into this environment came Dean and Marlys Jackson with their two small children. “The first Sunday morning I was here we had a good service,” he remembers. “People in our church really seemed to enter into enthusiastic praise and worship.” That week he got a phone call from a Mormon Sunday-school teacher wanting to bring junior-high students for a field trip. Jackson was thrilled.

“The next Sunday morning, there they were: two whole pews of girls in nice dresses and boys in white shirts. My congregation took one look and got suddenly icy. The atmosphere turned stiff and uncomfortable. I stood there knowing that those kids sure weren’t sensing the presence of God in our service, and I felt terrible.”

SURVEYING THE WALL

Jackson soon learned that to his beleaguered parishioners, Rock Canyon Assembly had for 50 years been a shelter from the storm, a place to escape the prevailing culture. Everyone had a grievance to tell, a case of how they or their child had been discriminated against by the LDS power structure. And most of them wanted their burly, six-foot-three pastor with the second-degree black belt in judo (from his Japan days) to help them fight for justice and maintain the wall of separation.

The Jacksons got their own taste of reality soon enough. While on a kindergarten outing, their son A.J. looked out of a bus window. “There’s my church!” he said innocently. The little girl next to him replied, “My daddy says that those places that have a cross on them—they lie.” (The LDS theology of Jesus tends not to emphasize the cross.)

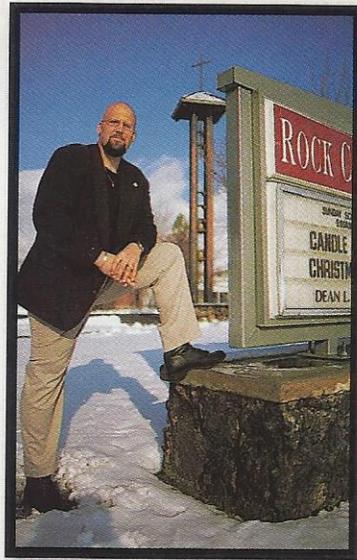
A.J. was crushed. Worse than just a slam of his church, this was a criticism of his daddy. Marlys Jackson was understandably incensed: “She was ready to go out and nuke about a third of Provo,” her husband says with a smile. “But we talked about it, and I said, ‘You know, is it possible that not every Mormon feels that way? Any group has its bigots—the Assemblies

of God as well as the LDS church.’ Gradually I got us all to calm down.”

Still, it was hard not to become paranoid. The Mormon presence seemed as immense as the Wasatch Mountain Range that loomed on the eastern edge of town, blocking out the sunrise. Jackson sensed himself struggling from week to week. What could he really hope to accomplish here?

Then, about six months into his pastorate, as he cried out to God in prayer one evening, he was jarred by a poignant thought: *Dean, your problem here is that you’re basically trying to ‘reach the dirty Mormons,’ aren’t you?* Jackson, stunned, had to nod his head in agreement. He did not really love LDS people; he saw them only as cultists to be converted.

From that point on, the 28-year-old pastor began to soften his heart and listen more carefully. He got involved at the Chamber of Commerce, eventually being



WAR NO MORE: “We don’t need any more jihads in Utah,” says Dean Jackson.

friends and opening doors. With the help of Ron Clark, BYU’s director of public affairs, the church’s music team made a CD, *Hymns We Share*, using common songs from the lds hymnal but done in the distinct Rock Canyon style. Selections ranged from “How Great Thou Art”

to the rollicking camp-meeting tune “He Set Me Free.” Listeners around town told Jackson that the CD was a big hit with teenagers—especially on Sundays, when only sacred music is allowed in Mormon homes.

Jackson had figured out how to build his own relationships across Provo’s Protestant-Mormon chasm, but he sensed God telling him to bring his church into the effort. He decided to broach the subject at a church board meeting in early 1998.

One couple told him: “Pastor, you can’t sp and then be told that now you have t

elected to the board. He joined the Rotary Club. In time he was invited to offer invocations at public events. “What I found were a lot of incredibly sincere people who just wanted Provo to be the best place to live in America. They wanted a safe, even ‘Judeo-Christian’ community in which to raise their kids, and they’d network with anybody who wanted to further that cause.”

Rock Canyon’s members watched their pastor’s networking with detachment. A few business owners supported Jackson, but others worried that he was compromising. More than one person reminded him that “light doesn’t mingle with darkness.” Having grown up with Sunday-school teachers who didn’t mind warming up their classes with a Mormon joke or two, they weren’t eager for a love fest.

Nevertheless, Jackson kept making

FACING THE ISSUE

“As I think about our position here in the midst of the LDS community, I’m concerned about some things,” Jackson told his board members. “My theology as an Assemblies of God minister is the same as it’s always been; I’m probably the most conservative preacher in town! But when I think about our attitudes and actions, it seems to me that maybe we haven’t always been Christlike. I want us to consider the need for repentance. And perhaps we even need to communicate that repentance to the Mormon church in some way.”

He proceeded to enlarge on this theme, then held his breath, wondering what the response would be. There was a snuffle in the room as one deacon, who had been raised LDS, began to cry. The others glanced at him nervously. Finally he spoke.

"Pastor, I've prayed for this day for so long. All these years I've been afraid to invite my relatives to this church, for fear of what someone might say to them or say within earshot of them. You're right; we need to confess."

One by one the other leaders joined in. By the end of the evening, a conviction grew that 1998 should be the Year of Repentance at Rock Canyon Assembly.

But no one was sure whether the congregation could be persuaded. "If we don't lay the groundwork properly," someone said, "this whole thing could blow up in our faces."

On subsequent Sundays Jackson gently began to emphasize the theme, and by June he preached a full sermon on repentance. He poured out his heart about representing Christ in a loving way. When he called for a response at the end, 80 percent of that day's congregation lined up across the front of the sanctuary, weeping and calling on God to remove bitterness and hatred. It was a singular moment for the church.

TAKING THE NEXT STEP

Now what? everyone wondered. *Is this enough, or must we do more?* Jackson went

behavior. Having received forgiveness from God, we now ask for forgiveness from the members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We declare 1998 The Year of Repentance. We pledge to live our lives as ambassadors for Christ, as though He were making His appeal through us.

"What do you think?" the pastor asked. "Is this something you would want to sign?"

There was a healthy dialogue. By the end of the meeting, the four pastors plus their wives, the ten board members and nine ministry coordinators had all signed the document. They decided that the rank and file of the church should have the same opportunity over a number of weeks, leading up to a special Service of Repentance on November 29, with Mormon representatives present.

Sunday after Sunday, through the summer and fall, more signatures appeared. Even past members who had moved away dropped by to sign. In the end, 160 parishioners had joined the leadership in confessing their hostility and vowing to change.

Not everyone jumped on the bandwagon, however. Attendance and offer-

LDS hierarchy, Jackson asked Carl Bacon, Area Authority and a member of the Fifth Quorum of the Seventy. (Bacon had once let Rock Canyon use an LDS facility for a meeting that required a satellite downlink.) Other LDS guests included BYU professors, staff members, county commissioners, and management guru Stephen R. Covey, author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, whom Jackson had met at a dinner.

"Reverend, I appreciate your spirit," more than one bishop told him, "but you don't have to do this."

"Yes, we do," he replied. "This isn't really between us and the Mormon church. It's between us and God. And we have to follow through."

DAY OF CONFESSION

Jackson and his staff determined that they would not modify the November 29 event to impress their guests. They would do the normal Rock Canyon service. When the day arrived, a standing-room-only crowd packed the building, with more than 100 Mormon visitors. Senator Orrin Hatch sent a representative; the leader of the city council was present, as well as the Chamber of

Commerce president. So was Assemblies of God district superintendent Philip Neely, who had flown in from Colorado for the occasion and supported it fully.

Framed copies of the signed documents stood on two draped easels, ready for unveiling later in the service.

The music team began the service with energetic praise music, supported by keyboard, guitar, bass, drums, and a Kenny G-style saxophone. Hands clapped on the offbeat and were sometimes raised. Before long there was an impromptu utterance in tongues followed by English interpretation. Then came prayer for the sick, with laying on of hands and anointing with oil. The Mormon guests watched wide-eyed. At offering time, the pastor urged visitors not to put tithe monies in the plate but rather to keep them for their own ward responsibilities. Finally it was time for the sermon.

Jackson read his text from 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 about God committing to each believer the ministry of reconciliation. He then admitted his own "dirty Jap/dirty Mormon" awakening back in

and your whole life hating people start loving them. It's just not that easy."

back to his staff for more discussion. His wife and Ron Coston, director of youth and music, began drafting a formal declaration. Eventually he presented their work to another meeting of the church board plus all department heads. Everyone listened carefully as he read:

In an effort to allow God's ministry of reconciliation to us to be evident in our lives, we the undersigned do hereby declare that in times past our attitudes and actions toward members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been completely unlike that which was demonstrated through the example of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We therefore join in solidarity with the Pastoral Staff, Executive Board and Leaders of Rock Canyon Assembly Worship Center in humble and sincere repentance for this

ings at Rock Canyon, which had been swelling nicely, now plateaued and began to slide. When Jackson visited one couple that had stopped attending, he was told, "Well, Pastor, you can't spend your whole life hating people and then be told that now you have to start loving them. It's just not that easy."

By October, Jackson had to call a special business meeting. "You need to know that our financial reserves are basically gone," he told the members. "In fact, we need to see some special gifts come in, or else we are probably going to have to reduce paid staff." The church stepped up its giving and prevented cutbacks, although some maintenance projects had to be postponed.

But there was no turning back on the repentance plan. In early November the invitations went out. To represent the

1992. He told of praying, "God, I know you want to do awesome things here in Provo. But there's no dialogue; it's 'us versus them.' Help us, Lord."

Warming to his subject, Jackson continued: "If I have become aware of anything, I've come to realize that somebody has to stand up and say, 'Enough is enough!' We can no longer keep treating one another the way we have. Little attitudes and actions can no longer be written off as just funny and harmless. Deep inside, they are ungodly. . . ."

"In the early part of 2 Corinthians, Paul says we are to be living letters, known and read by everyone. I'm tired of my life being a piece of junk mail. I want people to look at me and notice something unusual, something dynamic, something godly. And sometimes God calls us to do things that the world would find totally weird—which is what's happening this morning."

As the congregation sat transfixed, Jackson described the process that Rock Canyon Assembly had been through in recent months. "People have sincerely repented during this year.

One man in our church gave me a vivid analogy. He said, You know, I grew up Mormon. But the time came when I felt like 'the Mormon bus' wasn't going the

direction I wanted to go. So I got off. And the first group of people I met taught me how to throw rocks at the Mormon bus. For five years, I did nothing but throw rocks. You know what? I never stopped the bus. I never even detoured it. But on occasion I found a big enough rock and threw it hard enough to break a window—which only injured somebody on the bus whom I said I cared about.

"I can't tell you how strongly that man's words hit me," Jackson said. "He and I prayed together that day, 'Oh God, help us never to be rock-throwers! Help

"What I sense here is respect. To tolerate the person and his beliefs, whether

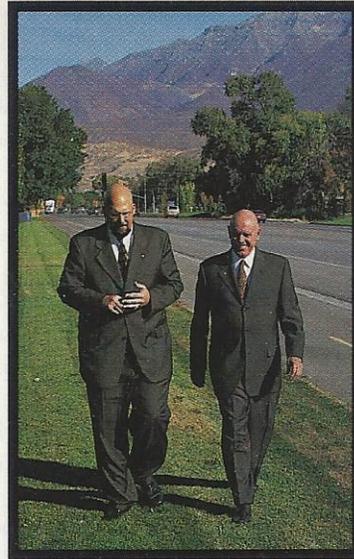
us rather to be the ambassadors you want us to be—ambassadors of Christ.'

"We're not here this morning to tell you that our doctrine is somehow going

what you've seen from us in public, and things we've done and said privately that you would have no way of knowing."

Harking back to 2 Corinthians 5, Jackson added: "God doesn't want me stirring

up war with the LDS church or anyone else. He wants me to be a force for reconciliation. That is what leads me, on behalf of this church, to stand here today and



ROAD TO RESPECT: Jackson has forged a friendship with author Stephen Covey, a devout Mormon.

DEAN MERRILL

The Mormon-Evangelical Divide

DISTINCTIVE LDS BELIEFS

1. God the Father and Jesus appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820, calling him to restore the Church of Christ.
2. The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price constitute sacred scripture, along with the Bible.
3. The Father (Elohim) is a distinct God from Jesus (the Jehovah of the Old Testament) and the Holy Ghost.
4. God the Father has a body and has a wife (the Heavenly Mother).
5. Jesus is the literal son of the Father (Elohim) and Mary. Some Mormon leaders contend that there was a sexual union between God and Mary.
6. All humans pre-existed as spirits in heaven. Mormon prophets have taught that those who were unfaithful in the spirit world were cursed to be born on earth with black skin.
7. Sacred temple ceremonies were revealed to Joseph Smith, including baptism for the dead and eternal marriage. Mormons can progress to godhood in the next world through following temple endowment rituals.

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

1. Smith's false prophecies, occult involvement, anti-biblical theology, and polygamy ruin his credibility as apostle-prophet.
2. The Bible alone is the written Word of God. Mormon scriptures contradict clear biblical teaching and cannot be new revelation from God.
3. The triune affirmation of the unity of God in three persons remains Christian orthodoxy.
4. Jesus said in John 4 that the Father is a Spirit. The Mormon notion that God has one or more wives is absolute speculation and reflects an anthropomorphic understanding of God.
5. Matthew and Luke teach that Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, and Christian tradition has never interpreted this as a sexual act.
6. The Bible nowhere implies that humans pre-exist. Mormon speculations about the curse on black people are rooted in nineteenth-century racist theories believed by early Mormon leaders.
7. Mormon temple ceremonies are not biblical in nature and easily lead to works righteousness.

• James A. Beverley, professor of theology and ethics at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto.

say we're sorry, and we repent for our warlike actions.

"This is not an attempt to manipulate you or get you to treat us better. This is just something we have to do before God."

At that, the Rock Canyon staff and board were called to the platform along with LDS leader Bacon, the drapes were removed, and the solemn statement read aloud. A standing ovation ensued.

When Elder Bacon came to the microphone, he was visibly moved. "We feel a wonderful spirit in this place," he began. "And we want you to know that although we don't expect this declaration, we gladly accept it.

"I know there may be some uneasiness on the part of some. But let me tell you that your pastor is a sincere, great man, and we love him. What we've heard in this marvelous sermon today is what the heavenly Father taught us all—to love one another.

Be Understood," and "Synergize." Speaking of Jackson, he says with arresting frankness, "This man loves the Savior. He's a bridge-builder, a peacemaker. It is humbling to be around him, because every time you meet someone with a spirit of contrition, it causes you to have the same spirit.

"What I sense here is great respect—which is more than just 'tolerance.' To tolerate is merely to put up with somebody. To respect is to honor the person and his beliefs, whether you agree with those beliefs or not. That is what we're seeing here."

Adds Ron Clark, the BYU administrator: "My response from the very first time I heard about Reverend Jackson's idea was 'You know, the shoe should be on the other foot.' We have plenty to apologize for, too."

Stephen Robinson, a professor of

us—but they didn't. They came, rather, with confession for their wrongdoing. I am embarrassed that they had to make the first move."

Meanwhile, at Rock Canyon Assembly, the core of the church felt positive about what it had done, even though attenders on the fringe continued to drift away. Attendance, which had been as high as 320 the previous June, bottomed out at 160 by February, then began to climb again. "We definitely lost momentum," Jackson admits. "In that sense, this was the dumbest thing I've ever done in my life. It didn't unleash a surging revival in our church by any means.

"Still, a whole deeper level is taking shape these days in our congregation. Individuals are going to their neighbors and coworkers and repenting for offenses they've committed. Other people have gradually gotten brave enough to go to

is merely to put up with somebody. To respect is to honor you agree with those beliefs or not." —Stephen Covey

That's what we want. We really do."

GRACE IN ACTION

What difference did one service make? Was it merely a catharsis to relieve guilt and then be forgotten?

The Mormon leaders took their copy of the document back to BYU and hung it prominently in the religion faculty's conference room. "I point it out in every Comparative Religion class I teach," says Roger Keller, professor of religious understanding. "Yes, it is true that differences define us, and they can't be ignored. But there are ways to connect us together as well, and this is a masterful example."

Stephen Covey promptly invited Jackson to speak to the Sunday-school class he teaches at his ward, a group of nearly 100. He didn't warn the class in advance; he just stood up and said, "This morning, instead of talking a great deal about Christ, we're going to watch Christlike behavior. I want you to meet my friend, Reverend Dean Jackson."

Covey sees the reconciliation in his hometown as embodying his famous Habits Four, Five, and Six: "Think Win-Win," "Seek First to Understand, Then to

ancient Scripture at BYU, was unable to attend the special service at Rock Canyon, but he has watched the events unfold with great interest. In 1997, he and Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary wrote an intriguing book: *How Wide the Divide* (InterVarsity). Blomberg represented the evangelical side, while Robinson spoke for Mormons. In his meetings with Jackson, Robinson has discovered a fellow bridge-builder. He vividly remembers his first contact with Jackson.

"I had just finished a long assignment of liaison with another denomination that was bringing its annual meeting to Utah, and I was supposed to help them understand Mormonism," he says. "After two years of feeling manipulated, stonewalled, and willfully misinterpreted, I was worn out. Then I met Dean, and it was like going from Philippi to Berea. Here was an honest man who would actually listen to me!

"Maybe I shouldn't say this, but the truth is that Dean Jackson and his congregation have shamed us. All this time we Mormons have been complaining about our treatment in America, and they could have sung the same song to

LDS ward parties—which are nothing more than neighborhood potlucks. There's nothing doctrinal about them. And they have a ton of fun! My people aren't afraid anymore."

No wonder that when Dean Jackson looks out from his pulpit on Sunday mornings these days, he sees more Mormons in the pews than ever before. People are asking him questions, seeking to understand, sorting out what it means to receive God's grace and live with him forever.

"We don't need any more jihads in Utah, please," Jackson says. "We're known as the Beehive State—a symbol of Mormon industriousness. And too many times, outsiders come here to kick the beehive, then run for the airport and leave me with a swarm of angry bees.

"If you come to Utah looking for a fight, you'll get the biggest battle you've ever seen. But if you come saying, 'I love this town and I want to see what God can do here,' you may be surprised by what unfolds." 

Dean Merrill is vice president and publisher of the International Bible Society in Colorado Springs.