
BY COMMON CONSENT

Vol. 17, Nos. 3-4

September 2011

THE FUN NEVER ENDS

The October 2011 Conference Critique will convene in Conference Room A of the Main Library, 210 E. 400 South, Salt Lake City, on October 3 from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Bev Hoppe (see below) will be moderating the discussion.

The only rumors anybody has reported will be the officially orchestrated joy and rejoicing at the new Relief Society history *Daughters in My Kingdom*, written "for women" by Susan Tanner, former general president of the Young Women. So we encourage particularly assiduous attention to the Relief Society general meeting, which will be broadcast Saturday evening, September 24. Yes, guys, too.

MEET BEV!

Note: Our moderator for the October Conference Critique will be Beverly Hoppe, a long-time participant in these gatherings and Sunstone. Here is her own introduction.

I have been a member of the Church my entire life although I did not grow up in the "traditional" Mormon home. My mother, raised LDS in a large family in Idaho, stopped attending church when she was sixteen and married out of the Church. I was born and raised in San Francisco, an only child. My mother took me to Sunday School as a child so I'd know about the Church, and both of my parents were very encouraging of my participation.

When I entered MIA at age twelve and learned that there was such a thing as sacrament meeting, I started attending it as well. We had a nice group of kids in my ward. I was very close (emotionally, not

geographically) to my grandmother who was devoted to the Church and was a great inspiration. I graduated from early-morning seminary, graduated from BYU in history, taught junior high for a year in Salt Lake City, and eventually made a thirty-two-year career with the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs in Washington, D.C., Seattle, and Salt Lake. I am now retired.

I have been active in the Church my entire life but have frequently been frustrated with some aspects of Mormon history and Mormon culture. I have very few "issues" about the basic doctrine of the Church. I solidly believe in the Restoration, the Book of Mormon as an ancient scripture, Christ's atonement, and modern-day prophets. My issues are more in the form of cultural aspects and some practices of the institutional church.

The last few years of listening to general conference have often left me scratching my head. I have gone, off and on, to the Conference Critiques for more than ten years. It's interesting to hear how others react to the messages presented. Often, their "hot button" issues are not mine and vice versa. I would encourage you to listen to as many sessions as possible and come ready to discuss things. It's usually more interesting for everyone if people have listened to most talks and can participate. However, I would still encourage you to attend even if you are unable to listen to the talks.

I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible.

APRIL CONFERENCE CRITIQUE: SUSPICIOUSLY BLAND

Who are the "bland police?" participants in the semi-annual Mormon Alliance Conference Critique wondered after a quick poll of participants established that most of them found the conference talks occupying a broad band of "basic principles." Even "the rhetoric of doom was muted," noted Paul Tinker, moderator of the discussion.

"Usually I'll really like at least a couple of talks and really not like a couple of talks, but nothing stood out in this conference," explained one participant. Even the women in the group shrugged off Elder Quentin Cook's "praise sandwich" of women as well-worn material. Yes, it was "patronizing--but it's always *been* patronizing," as one put it. His two-sentence stricture against "judging" other women on the basis of whether they were employed outside of the home was refreshing, but it was juxtaposed against an example of a woman who decided not to seek employment when she realized that she would be doing it to buy "frivolous" items like a new carpet. Another participant observed, "It's the economy. How many families are staying afloat because the wife is working while the husband is unemployed or underemployed? If the tithing is going to keep coming in, *somebody* has to be working."

One participant hypothesized: "I think the reason we hear the same themes over and over and over is that the audience changes very quickly. College students tend to listen intently; but when they're married and dealing with little children, they don't have the luxury of that kind of time. When they get time-intensive callings and run into challenges raising teenagers, they tend to listen hard again. Their needs dictate what they take away, even if the message is basically the same." What wasn't clear is how the speakers decide who is listening.

For example, although single women received the usual "consoling" message, single men came in for surprisingly harsh rebukes for "hanging out" (as Elder Dallin H. Oaks put it) rather than dating seriously with the view of marrying. Participants recalled President Ezra Taft Benson's command that

they should "rise from the dust and be men," but this approach has not been a regular feature, despite the family-oriented rhetoric, of the past twenty years or so. Elder Oaks's willingness to read a letter from a concerned single woman who wanted him to fix the problem did not find a welcome among participants. One married woman who had watched that session with her husband said that he immediately said, "Well, I certainly wouldn't want to date *her!*" The woman added, "And I certainly wouldn't want to get dating advice from *him* [Elder Oaks]." Elder Oaks also chastised single women who were more involved in their "careers" than in being ready for marriage.

A revival of a long-discredited message was listing marriage as a returned missionary's top priority. One participant said his nephew's mission president in his exit interview had instructed him to get married within six months "and he's already a year over that deadline."

Participants speculated that the decreasing number of children in the average Mormon family may have caught the General Authorities' attention, since fewer children mean a shrinking pool of prospective missionaries. President Monson, while joining in the chorus of rebuke, added specific advice not to postpone marriage and children for education or establishing oneself in a career because dealing with these challenges will bring a couple closer. One participant read the wry observation from an email list pointing out that President Monson's obvious sorrow at the number of cancellations of sealings he is asked to deal with may be directly related to the number of marriages that fail because of economic stress and the immaturity of too-young partners.

Moderator Paul Tinker led an energetic discussion about "what was missing" from conference. Topping the list was the Church's support of a more compassionate policy on immigration. "Bishop Burton's presence at the signing made the Church's support clear, even though the Church wouldn't become a signatory," he pointed out. He characterized the irony: "It's the law of the harvest. The Church has been supporting hyper-

conservative causes for so long that members can't reverse their thinking." He cited the more than 2500 responses to the *Salt Lake Tribune's* analytic article on the legislature's immigration policy, an astonishing number of whom described themselves as "devout LDS" but who announced that they wouldn't support the Church's "soft stand on lawbreakers." The Church's lack of support for gun control is another manifestation of "the law of the harvest." The General Authorities "are hearing that they'll be losing support from their core constituency."

Another missing message was one on religious freedom, a topic on which Elder Oaks has been giving speeches in a variety of settings. Its omission from conference messages provides evidence that "the General Authorities are tailoring their messages to certain venues. Just listening to general conference doesn't give the complete picture of the Church's position across the board." Conference has become the liturgy of Mormonism." All three Church magazines are devoting their March issues to pre-conference prep, and Elder Holland's address and some prayers stressed that the conference talks were the message that the Lord wanted members to heed for the next six months.

As another missing topic, one participant noted that she had been anxiously listening for a message distancing the Church from Glen Beck "who has been coming close to saying that God personally speaks to him."

After the amount of publicity devoted to the new *Church Handbook of Instruction* last fall and the worldwide satellite training program, it was surprising that only one speaker mentioned it. One participant announced with delight that her ward had a tradition of having sacrament meeting opening and closing prayers given by married couples (a single would be paired with another single). When she noted this change in the handbook, she sent a tactful message to a member of the bishopric "and by a week from the next Sunday, the policy had changed."

Also missing were references by some speakers of the specific assignments which would certainly have been interesting to listeners: Elder Cecil O.

Samuelson, president of Brigham Young University, did not mention BYU; Bishop David H. Burton made no mention of the Church's expensive "Downtown Rising" project. Elder Paul Johnson, the Church Commissioner of Education, which maintains tight controls over every aspect of Church education, spoke on another subject completely.

And as usual, despite the rhetoric on the family and how all human beings are members of Heavenly Father's family, Heavenly Mother was once again conspicuous by her absence. "So the ideal Mormon family is headed by a single dad?" queried one listener.

Participants were intrigued by the continuing announcement of yet more temples, despite the proudly cited statistic by President Monson that 85% of members are already within 200 miles of a temple. The newly announced Meridian Temple seemed a particularly puzzling choice since the town of Meridian is about eight miles west of Boise, whose temple is on its west edge.

Participants speculated briefly on the obvious meaning President Monson assigned to the temple in Rome--perhaps a generational symbol?--and his delight at getting the city's mayor and a senator to "put their feet on the shovel" at the groundbreaking. One participant had noticed that the design of the main, ornamental doors contained a distinct cross. "I think they want citizens of Rome walking by to know that this is a Christian church," she commented.

Some participants expressed feeling disturbed with the clash between the traditional stories about Church members traveling nonstop for days to reach a temple as the model of sacrifice and the "awkward transition" to the current "sacrifice" of becoming worthy for a temple recommend by giving up World Wisdom habits. "I think they've got it backwards," commented one participant. "President Monson said endowments and sealings are 'worth any sacrifice,' but psychologically, if the sacrifice is so consuming, then going to the temple *has* to be worth it--otherwise how do you justify the sacrifice?" She reported a fellow conference-watcher's discomfort with the "inspirational" story of the father who, with two sons,

spent five years away from his family earning enough money for his family to go to the nearest temple. "What if he'd spent those five years being an involved and caring father, raising his children, and having faith that, if they were patient, a temple would be built in their country--which in fact is what happened?"

Another participant commented that he always thinks of the members' money being poured into the transportation companies to get members to the temple while education, medical care, and better economic circumstances are postponed. "What kind of God demands that kind of sacrifice?" asked yet another participant. "And what would be wrong with an endowment house within a reasonable distance?" This comment reminded another participant that he had heard LeGrand Richards, speaking to an Institute group at the University of Utah, say that the General Authorities had talked about "dedicating a little room in a stake center where temple ordinances could be taken care of."

After the October conference's brouhaha over President Packer's talk, "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" was conspicuously missing from the speakers' menu, especially for a conference that so repeatedly stressed the importance of "the family." This single mention was a sharp cut-back in citations. Rich Nielsen, a graduate student at Harvard, examined general conference citations for the past ten years (2000-2010--full list in next issue) and documented that the proclamation, though not officially scripture, was the 22nd most popular of scriptural quotations, having been cited a total of 54 times in the ten years he covered. In contrast, Official Declaration--2, which extended priesthood ordination to black men, was quoted exactly twice. "That makes sense," said one observer wryly. "They don't want to remind people that we used to be so racist."

Why the sudden dip in quotations of the Proclamation on the Family? Only one speaker quoted from it but did not identify it as the proclamation--although he specified that it was produced by the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve. Was this a way of supporting President

Packer's position but without attracting the attention of those who did not already have it memorized? Furthermore, Elder Holland stressed that speakers had "wept and worried" over their subjects, again suggesting a defense of President Packer's willingness to engage in controversial topics, while Elder Todd Christofferson's injunction that the righteous would "not only accept but seek correction" again suggested a defense of President Packer.

President Packer spoke while seated, but was visibly slumping to one side. One participant who had viewed the proceedings on a high-resolution screen, said that oxygen tubes and nasal canula were visible, something that the other participants had not noticed. Everybody, however, had noticed the surprisingly lengthy time, about twenty seconds, immediately after his talk while the camera pulled to the farthest possible view from the back of the Conference Center and froze. "Obviously, they were moving President Packer back to his seat."

As for his talk, it was "a laundry list" of things he's talked about before, but his insistence on using the Church's full name, even though "we do not resent" the appellation of "Mormon," created the second conference in a row that Church Public Affairs issued what amounted to a reversal of a Packer position. Church spokesmen said candidly that people doing internet searches on the Church use "Mormon" for a key word. Continuing to reach them requires using language they understand. One participant commented that the very popular feature "I'm a Mormon," makes no attempt to plod through the longer name of the Church.

Some participants had listened particularly for references to the Broadway smash hit *The Book of Mormon* by the producers of *South Park*. The Church had issued a "tactfully bland" statement before the show opened contrasting one evening's entertainment with the "lasting joy" of reading the Book of Mormon, but had since stayed quiet about it. One participant who had seen the show admitted that he found the language "shocking" but thought that if anybody had been "disrespected," it was the Ugandans and Christianity in general. "The Church

actually came out of it looking pretty good."

Elder Robert D. Hales was present but was wearing an extended leg brace of the type associated with knee replacement surgery. He was listed on the website as not speaking due to ill health, but other General Authorities have spoken while seated. Usually, if an apostle is well enough to be present, then he is well enough to speak.

Others expressed concern about President Eyring who "was noticeably shuffling while he walked," started at one point to announce the choir number when they were already poised to sing, and who was a decade off on the year of the Teton Dam disaster (he said 1966; it was actually 1976). This error was particularly odd since he had been president of Ricks College where many of the homeless received shelter and food, thanks to its slightly higher ground. It was apparently purposeful, not a slip of the tongue, that he engaged in "major historical revisionism" by defining the law of consecration and the United Orders as merely historical names for the welfare program.

As usual, President Monson did not conduct any sessions, nor had he spoken at the Young Women's session a week earlier. The short video of girls as "guardians of virtue" included a brief concluding message from President Monson. Though present at the Young Women's meeting, he did not speak.

An email correspondent summarized what he perceived as the main themes: "(1) pay your tithing (we need your money); (2) become temple-worthy (by paying your tithing; we need your money);" and (3) the Church welfare program celebrates its 75th anniversary (and gets good publicity from its investment in the poor). Although Sister Silvia Allred's talk about the welfare program was among the favorites of listeners, others expressed discomfort with the glaring contrast, documented in the Sunday between-sessions special, between the lengthy list of welfare services available in the United States and Canada (adoption, Deseret Industries, direct aid, employment services) and the severe limitations on aid outside that area. Apparently except for direct member-to-member sharing and occasional official

aid projects (digging wells, supplying wheelchairs), whatever "welfare program" exists depends on the members' monetary contributions, handed in to their bishops and branch presidents.

Another manifestation of "the law of the harvest" was President Uchtdorf's well-received talk counseling that a testimony and spiritual confirmation usually come incrementally over time. One woman recognized in it "the seminary and institute" typical mixed message. "The teachers keep saying that you mustn't expect spectacular manifestations, but then they say that you've got to get a testimony of your own--a conversion experience--and all the examples are always events or episodes. Kids really grow up thinking they have to have a conversion *story* to tell."

Among other observations: "Those annoying pop-ups" (text of scriptures being quoted or illustrations) were either gone or dialed far back, so that they involved only those very directly related to the content. But how did the decision get made and who made it? Were employees let go?

Candidates for favorite talk were Elder Bednar's address, President Uchtdorf's "road to Damascus" talk, and those by Benjamin DeHoyas, Walter Gonzalez, and Silvia Allred.

WATCHING THE CHURCH GROW?

Ray Felsted and Paul Tinker

These statistics were reported at the April 2011 general conference.

Stakes: 2,896 (31 more than 2009 - 1.08% increase)

Missions: 340 (4 less than 2009 - 1.16% decrease)

Districts: 614 (2 less than 2009 - 0.32% decrease)

Congregations: 28,660 (236 more than 2009 - 0.83% increase)

Membership: 14,131,467 (306,583 more than 2009 - 2.22% increase)

Increase in Children of Record: 120,528 (806 more than 2009 - 0.67% increase)

Converts Baptized: 272,814 (7,292 less than 2009 - 2.60% decrease)

Missionaries serving: 52,225 (489 more than 2009 - 0.95% increase)

The December 31, 2010, statistical report shows the following growth: the Church increased by 2.22%, equivalent to the slow growth of 2003 and just under the average growth of 2.3% for the intervening years.

U.S. growth was 1.42%, unchanged from the previous year, while international growth declined to 2.9% from 3.1%, with the majority of the growth occurring in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia.

Congregational growth, as well as increases in stakes and districts and the number of missionaries serving was only about 1%. Lower congregational growth shows the likelihood of decreased activity rates among members or may indicate the need to develop more leadership abilities among the laity.

The increase in children of record and converts baptized was essentially flat, and using an estimated 5% death rate for the Church leaves approximately 18,000 individuals dropped from the rolls, either

through excommunication or by request for cancellation of membership.

Another trend indicative of reduced activity rates is the increase of members per congregation, growing from 481 in 2008 to 486 in 2009 and 493 in 2010. Obviously, many of these "paper" members never darkened their ward doors.

These trends are similar to growth patterns in the 1930s, another period of global economic contraction. During that decade congregational growth was only 2.5% for the entire ten years (although many branches were closed in Europe in the early days of World War II). Membership growth for the decade was only 21%.

The first decade of the 21st Century saw membership growth of 27% and growth in congregations of 10.6%. US membership as a percentage of the world Church dropped from 47.1% to 44.8% reflecting the accelerated growth in countries outside the United States.

Mormon Alliance
1519 Roberta Street
Salt Lake City 84115