

# Marketing the Mormon Image:

## An Interview with Wendell J. Ashton

*Wendell J. Ashton, Managing Director of Public Communications for the Church, was interviewed for Dialogue by Dennis L. Lythgoe in Salt Lake City, October 11, 1976.*

*Dialogue:* The image of Mormonism seems to have changed from unfavorable in the 1960s to favorable in the 1970s. Has the Church itself played a role in this change?

*Ashton:* The Public Communications Department was organized in 1972, and we like to think that a good part of this change in the image came from the efforts of the Church through public communications. Under the guidelines given by President Harold B. Lee, public communications is not a matter of reacting, but of taking the initiative in dealing with the public and particularly with the news media. So, since 1972 we've been trying to take the initiative in letting the world know the Mormon people for what they are and for what they stand. We now have approximately 1,000 people in church service as public communications coordinators and directors who are making contacts with the news media. We're heartened by the results.

*Dialogue:* So you think the Department has actually had an influence?

*Ashton:* We hope it has. We now have a worldwide organization, and as we travel—I've been with President Spencer W. Kimball in the South Pacific this year and over to England and Scotland—we meet with the news media and with our public communications people. Generally, the public communications representatives are doing an excellent job. Many of them are professional public relations people or are with newspapers or radio or television stations, and they are contributing church time to this public communications effort of the Church.

Also, during the past four years we've introduced the Homefront public service announcements on radio and television. We've had marvelous exposure through them. Last year most of the commercial television stations and about half of the radio stations carried them. We estimate that in four years, about 31 million dollars worth of free radio and television time was devoted to these Homefront announcements. We feel that they have helped build a positive image.

The Tabernacle Choir now has more exposure than it's ever had. Over 1,000 radio and television stations around the world now carry the Choir's weekly program. The Osmonds are a new factor and certainly a powerful one, particularly since the "Donny and Marie Show" started on ABC. Of course, the Osmonds are very proud of their Church membership, and we've had a very good "press" (to use the expression) on the Osmonds.

*Dialogue:* Do you get good press by making special contact with journals or newspapers or magazines? *Family Circle* magazine, for instance, ran a favorable article on the Church's health habits.

*Ashton:* Oh, yes. It is part of professional public relations work. That *Family Circle* article came from a visit by *Family Circle* magazine to Jerry Cahill, our press relations director. There have been several other favorable articles recently, too.

*Dialogue:* Is Jerry Cahill your press agent?

*Ashton:* No, he's more than that. A press agent just responds to requests for information or distributes news releases. Jerry Cahill is a public relations man, and a good PR man takes the initiative in a creative way and tries to get the news media to look at his client in a creative way. We're striving to do this all over the world through the thousand public communications representatives. We anticipate a worthwhile event, contact the news media and try to convince them to cover it.

For example, a public mass meeting against pornography soon will be held here in Salt Lake City. Now it isn't sponsored by the Church, as you know, but the leadership of the Church is encouraging our members as citizens to get involved in the fight against pornography, so we are helping to get some good coverage on the meeting. I've been on the phone to New York and other points in the country. We hope some positive coverage on Salt Lake City and its opposition to obscenity will result with the media nationwide.

*Dialogue:* What about blacks and the racial issue? Are we still vulnerable on that?

*Ashton:* It doesn't come up as much now in our news conferences. It hasn't been a big issue as it was five to eight years ago. The inquiries still come, but news interest is receding. I think the public has accepted us for what our position is, and there doesn't seem to be the probing there was several years ago.

*Dialogue:* Has the subject of family replaced it?

*Ashton:* The Church is emphasizing the family home evening program. Our public communications people again have gone to governors and mayors across the country, and there have been state and city proclamations supporting Family Week, tying into our family home evening programs. These activities, together with the Homefront announcements and other publicity, have turned attention to our strong emphasis on strong families.

*Dialogue:* Are there any other tough issues in press conferences?

*Ashton:* Yes. A development in recent years is the question of equal rights among women. That question is coming up, and I think we have much that is positive to say! Utah gave the vote to women in 1870, fifty years before they received it nationally. And of course, the Prophet Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society in 1842 when women's organizations were pretty much unknown in the United States.

We're trying to point out that we believe generally in equal rights for women, but not identical rights. We believe that women, physically and emotionally, are *different* from men, that they're not created as identical individuals—that there's a difference between a man and a woman. The Church recognizes that each, with different roles, is important in the sight of the Lord and in the programs of the Church.

*Dialogue:* Would you say that the problem of equal rights for women may even eclipse the racial issue in the future?

*Ashton:* I think it is a bigger issue right now. I wouldn't say it is a *problem*. It's a *subject*, and it is preempting the subject of the blacks as we meet with the news media people.

*Dialogue:* As you project the image of the Church and the family, do you try to lay groundwork for the future in case that issue becomes stickier?

*Ashton:* Oh, yes. We've anticipated that this problem of equal rights for women would be developing, and we've tried to take the initiative. We've arranged interviews in New York with Camilla Kimball, President Kimball's wife, with Barbara B. Smith, the President of the Relief Society and with Ruth H. Funk, the President of the Young Women's organization. In fact, we have a woman serving with us whose whole assignment is to concentrate on this subject of women and the Church. She is Moana Ballif Bennett, a former writer with United Press International and a former member of the MIA General Board—a very able woman, a mother of 5 or 6 children. She lives in my ward. And she is, of course, dedicated to the Church. We feel she's doing a great amount of good in getting our story to the news media. She is spending a lot of time with Sister Smith, Sister Funk and other women leaders in the Church, to help them in meeting the press, and in telling our story as it should be told before the news media.

*Dialogue:* Are you trying to help the missionary program through your work?

*Ashton:* Unquestionably. We know that people tend to choose the product and candidate whose name they know better. We feel that as we make every effort to bring the Church out of obscurity, it's going to open the way for missionary work. Elder Royden G. Derrick, one of the new general authorities, when he was president of the England–Leeds Mission, conducted an informal survey. As I recall, he said that about half the persons committed to baptism backed away in the last few days. He felt the reason was the image of the Church in the eyes of the public. Relatives and friends who talked to these candidates for

baptism had associated the Church with polygamy and with some of the sensational stories of the past in Britain. This past year we opened up a full-time public communications office in London. We feel we are going to help missionary work around the world.

Let me give you an example. Our Department, in cooperation with the Missionary Executive Committee, presented in the Cleveland Coliseum, a program geared to the Word of Wisdom. The Cleveland Coliseum is halfway between Akron and Cleveland and not far from Kirtland, where the Word of Wisdom was revealed to the Prophet Joseph. On our program, President Kimball was the featured speaker. We had prominent Latter-day Saint sports figures like Harmon Killebrew, the baseball slugger, Vernon Law, a World Series pitching hero of about ten years ago; and Marve Bateman, the professional football player. Besides them, we had George and Lenore Romney, and Miss Teen Canada of 1974, Diana Lynn MacDonald, who is a convert to the Church and a brilliant young woman—one of the brightest teenagers I've encountered. Though she and a brother are church members, her mother is not.

I had a good visit with her mother, who said to me, "Mr. Ashton, why can't the people of Canada know you good Mormons for what you really are?" I think she was giving me a message. She seemed to feel very favorable toward the Church, but because of our image in Canada, she was reluctant. I think that's pretty typical. Even though people may feel the gospel is true, they're reluctant because of our image. We feel our image IS improving.

I'll never forget flying with the Tabernacle Choir to Munich about two years ago. We were in a chartered plane with two stewardesses from New England. As we rode through the night, from Bangor to Munich, we visited with these girls and found that one of them had never heard of the Mormons. She didn't know whether the word "Mormon" referred to a new breakfast cereal, or *WHAT* it was. The other one had heard of the Tabernacle Choir. Here were two bright stewardesses—one of them had never heard of the Mormons and the other had heard of the Choir—and that's all they knew about the Mormons.

*Dialogue:* What then is the Mormon image you would like to see projected?

*Ashton:* If we could project the image of what we are—people who believe in the divine origin of Man, his divine destiny, that the family is not only the most important unit of society, but it's an eternal unit, and that the Church's objectives are to bring people happiness through the full restored gospel of the Master and to bring not only happiness in this life but progression and joy in the unending days ahead. We want to project that we are a happy people. "Man is that he might have joy."

*Dialogue:* I saw the "Today" show when President Kimball appeared on it. It seemed to me his interviewers jumped on him about blacks and the racial issue and about business involvement without even working up to it.

*Ashton:* They did. (Incidentally, that program was arranged by our Public Communications people.) I thought they were, shall I say, rougher, on the President of the Church than they could have been or should have been, but I didn't feel too badly about the interview, because I felt that overall the results were more positive than negative so far as the Church is concerned. I think the fact that our

world leader would appear and answer difficult questions is generally positive. I think that because of the persecution we've had in the past, sometimes we are more sensitive to criticism than we need be. A news article about the Church which is fair and generally positive, which may criticize us in one or two places, is more helpful to us than something that's all sweetness and light.

Such a news article is actually more believable and those of us with experience in marketing know the importance of believability. I think—and I don't say this critically of us as members of the Church—that sometimes, because of the persecution we've experienced in the past, we may be a little more sensitive to objective criticism than we should be.

*Dialogue:* Do you think we are past the point where we tend to view persecution of our people as a sign of the truth in our cause? Are we in for more criticism?

*Ashton:* We're not going to get beyond criticism. I think the Devil is still at work. He's still working against the purposes of the Lord. I think any church that is successful, as we are, is going to have other churches look at us as a threat—a competitor—and I certainly don't think we're going to have it easy. I don't think the Lord *EVER* wanted His people to have it easy. It was that way with the children of Israel and the Mormon pioneers.

I think our greatest challenges in the Church now are some of these new developments—liberal views about homosexuality, pornography, some people teaching that the family isn't necessary. I think we have a great challenge to hold fast to our teachings and our principles and to communicate them to the world—that chastity before marriage and fidelity after marriage are not only the right ways to live, they're the smart ways to live.

*Dialogue:* Tell me more about your role at press conferences. Do you handle tough questions? Do you appear with the Prophet or the First Presidency?

*Ashton:* We have different formats. Sometimes President Kimball will give a message and he may be rushed, as he was when Senator Robert Dole was here, and excuse himself early. I remained at that conference to answer questions from the news media.

*Dialogue:* So sometimes you do fill the role of the press secretary?

*Ashton:* Yes. Generally, President Kimball himself answers questions at news conferences. He does well. We were in Minneapolis a while ago and the Episcopalian Church was holding its conference there. They had just officially given the priesthood to the women. At our news conference at the airport, President Kimball was asked what he felt about the action taken by the Episcopalians. I thought he just handled the questions masterfully. He didn't enter into the Episcopalian controversy. He said, that's their concern. But he did say there is only one source of priesthood authority and that's from the Lord, and we have it.

*Dialogue:* How do you feel about some of the unofficial publications about Mormons, such as *Dialogue*, *Exponent II* and *Sunstone*? Are they helpful or harmful to the Church's image?

*Ashton:* Oh, I wouldn't want to say that I endorsed them. I think some of them have published some excellent articles.

*Dialogue:* One more topic. We understand that there was a consulting firm hired by the Church to gauge people's desires and attitudes before the construction of the new visitors center in Washington, D.C. How does this fit in?

*Ashton:* We're doing this all the time. We conducted an in-depth survey of six major markets in the United States—Seattle, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Dallas or Houston and one other. The survey was done by a non-LDS professional survey organization in the Midwest. That survey told us a lot of things. We learned that half the citizenry of this country couldn't name even one book of the Old Testament. In other words, the adult population isn't familiar with the Bible, and yet we've been using the Bible in our approaches in visitors centers and missionary work. I don't mean that we shouldn't use the scriptures, but for that first contact we've assumed people know the Bible when they don't.

Another interesting feature of that survey was that some adults said it was of no importance to them if a Church was *THE* one true Church. We've spent a lot of our efforts in missionary work proving to people that we're the one true church, which we *ARE*, of course. But in the Washington Temple Visitors Center we tried to relate to what people are interested in. We found they are most interested in happiness and in family life. That's why there is greater stress on the family.

So we are using surveys to give us guidance in formulating presentations at visitors centers.

*Dialogue:* You've been doing this for some time now?

*Ashton:* Yes, we're using surveys not only for visitors centers, but in our whole approach with the media. For instance, in December 1976, we purchased prime time for a one hour special, "The Family . . . and Other Living Things," for the 54 top markets of the country. It was orchestrated through the Missionary Executive Committee. It involved Church members fellowshiping, and it had commercials inviting people to phone in for a free booklet describing our family home evening program and giving hints on how to communicate with children.

*Dialogue:* Back to the visitors centers for a minute. During a recent visit to the one in Washington, D.C., it seemed there was a definite absence of a —

*Ashton:* *HARD SELL!* C. L. "Kenny" Stoker, the Washington director, reports that there are more referrals from that visitors center per volume than any other in the world. Brother Stoker reported that an average of 39 non-LDS visitors leave their names and addresses each day. Of these, an estimated 55 percent are favorable to being taught the gospel. Twenty a day—that's pretty good!

*Dialogue:* So the more subtle approach is working.

*Ashton:* Right. Begin with what they want, and then say, "We've got the recipe for happiness for you, a divine recipe!"