

Speaking Up: Two-Way Communication in the Church

Gael Ulrich

In my journal, I termed it the Sunday Massacre. The disagreement centered on how much money we, the bishopric, could extract in good conscience from our struggling ward members for the stake building fund. I said one thing; the stake president insisted on another. The argument had been festering for months but had suddenly come to a head during a meeting among a few ward and stake leaders between ward conference sessions. I, who had been resustained as first counselor in the bishopric that morning, found myself slated for a release by afternoon. In the process, the stake president relieved me of my temple recommend. As a life-long active member of the Church — a former bishop and stake high counselor — I had disagreed with stake presidents before, but those differences had been resolved peacefully. How had this conflict escalated beyond control? What could I do to resolve it?

In the three years since that sore encounter, I have given serious thought to the dilemma of authority conflicts within the Church. Many members find themselves disagreeing with Church authorities at one time or another. A few dissidents drop out quietly. Even fewer, I would guess, leave with a colorful display of fireworks, demanding excommunication along the way. Most seem to suffer and wait — some silently and others not so silently. Often, a member attempts to register negative feelings by refusing callings or withholding financial contributions. Sometimes, it's simply evidenced by a lack of enthusiasm for Church services.¹ Because the gospel demands Christian love, however, these solutions cannot be considered healthy for the Church or for the individual. I have had several differences with higher Church authority, ranging from mild frustration to this explosive incident about the budget. From them, I have derived three principles for resolving such conflicts. I share them in the

GAEL D. ULRICH is professor of chemical engineering at the University of New Hampshire and serves as a home teacher.

¹ K. Lynn Paul, "Passive Aggression and the Believer," *DIALOGUE* 10 (Winter 1977): 86-91.

hope that they will be useful to other members who may become involved in similar conflicts.

My first recommendation is: (1) Communicate with leaders in a polite, respectful, but firm manner. (2) Appeal to a higher authority when necessary. We should, indeed, go through prayer to the highest level at all stages of conflicts. (3) Be patient when the problem is not resolved to our satisfaction, even though we feel we have received spiritual support for our position.

The value of communication in ecclesiastical conflicts should be obvious, as it is in marriage. Yet its application (as in marriage) is not always so simple. In my experience, disagreements between members and leaders are more easily resolved at the ward rather than the stake level, simply because people associate more intimately within the ward. At the stake level and with the Church generally, remoteness sometimes magnifies misunderstandings and leads to the stereotyping of leaders both positively and negatively.

Although failure to communicate is sometimes the fault of the leader, it can often be blamed on the follower. Intimidated by the difference in status, we fail to realize that our leaders are real people with their own personalities and problems. When I was in the sixth grade, my school teacher was also my stake president. He was a good teacher and a good man. Nevertheless, one day he became angry with a boy sitting behind me and fired a chalkboard eraser at him. As I heard it whistle past my ear and rebound off the back wall, I gained respect for his temper as well as his throwing arm. I also realized that stake presidents are human. Since then, several of my friends and relatives have become stake presidents and General Authorities, men who obviously have problems at home and at work just as I do. Pressure from both above and below in the Church can strain even the most saintly personality. Further stress results from an awareness that they and their families must constantly act their part. A first step toward better communication with leaders is recognizing their problems and acknowledging their humanness.

Communication is not always easy for me. Shy by nature, I don't look for controversy or say much when it first appears. But when the disagreement reaches a certain stage, I can't restrain myself. When I do speak out, the words come with deep conviction and emotion. Some leaders might interpret my reaction as criticism, especially those who are insecure. Sometimes I do manage to communicate warmly and effectively. When I am successful, the conflict may not be resolved; but unfailingly my personal relationship with the opposing leader is enhanced by the effort.

An instructive failure occurred while I was bishop of a progressive metropolitan ward on the East Coast. Our Sunday School superintendent, trained as an artist, was responsible for the weekly printed program. In reaction to what he called the "dead-hands-holding-a-Bible" art often displayed on ward bulletins, he prepared some original line drawings and invited other artistic ward members to do the same. What followed was a series of interesting, unusual drawings which became quite well known, even beyond stake boundaries. Most comments were favorable, but there was a certain obvious silence from some quarters. Finally, a member of the stake presidency began questioning

me about the programs and suggested we discontinue what "stake leaders" thought was "inappropriate" art.

Being untrained in art myself, I had felt a little uneasy about some of the drawings, particularly one of a chubby free-form angel flying in the air, sweeping the word "JOY" in her wake. It had seemed a little racy to me. When I expressed my apprehension to the Sunday School superintendent, he pulled out the day's program and asked "What does this say?" As I looked at the art and thought about his question, I realized that his programs, of hundreds I had seen, were the only ones I remembered or contemplated. (Fifteen years later, I still remember those drawings.) I acknowledged his point and promised to support his efforts.

Pressure from the stake continued, culminating one Sunday with a visit from the stake president who insisted that the programs be censored. He considered the art irreverent, "modernistic," inappropriate, and distracting. To prove his point he gestured to that day's program and said, "This drawing of a Protestant church on the cover of your program is the last straw." Uncomfortably, I pointed out the identifying caption which he had overlooked: Manti Temple. Undaunted, he insisted that we change to a less controversial cover, and I, intimidated by our hierarchal relationship, complied. Subsequent illustrations had modest, attractive, safe, but much less memorable art. Considering the thought, quality, and love invested in those Sunday programs, I regret the loss. In retrospect I realize that I share the blame for the loss of that artwork because I failed to communicate with the stake president at an effective interpersonal level.

Another experience with the same leader taught me the importance of voicing opinions. A booming student population and other problems associated with our urban location led stake officials to decide, without consulting anyone from the ward, that our building should be turned over to student wards and the LDS Institute. Permanent members were to be housed in a new building in the suburbs. When the stake president told me one Sunday morning about this change, I accepted it reluctantly but obediently. Shrinking from the task of informing ward members myself, I asked if he would meet with the ward council that afternoon. This he did, telling them of his decision. Two members disagreed strongly. Obviously taken aback, the president compromised by asking us to study the issue more thoroughly and recommend our solution for the space problem.

Wrestling through this issue with ward members was one of the highlights of my tenure as bishop. We studied vigorously, held open hearings, and consulted experts on population, transportation, and growth trends. We produced a report which honestly but respectfully disagreed with the stake presidency's recommendation. In my mind, the most compelling argument against the stake's plan was the abandonment of center-city members without automobiles.

The stake president read our report with an open mind and had the self-confidence and integrity to accept its conclusions on the strength of sound arguments. From him and from those vocal ward officers I learned an important lesson: respectful and reasonable disagreement with authority can yield posi-

tive results. I resolved then that in the future I would speak up when I felt strongly about an issue.

Communication on the immediate level is not always enough, and we must appeal to higher authority. This need emerged for me when I faced a significant gospel problem — the Church's black-priesthood policy. For most of my life, that problem had been academic. But when a black man joined our ward, it became more immediate. I learned to know and love this man who was my assistant Scoutmaster. Suddenly, I found myself as his bishop. A local policy, established earlier, prohibited this man from attending priesthood meeting. The brother himself was reasonably understanding and tolerant of the practice, and the ward members were wonderfully supportive. Then another black brother moved into the ward from California where he had attended priesthood meeting "in preparation for the day when he would be ordained." When he arrived, both men approached me and asked if they might attend in our ward. I agreed to pursue the already sensitive issue with stake authorities.

In the months that followed, I discussed the problem directly with two stake presidents (reorganization having occurred) and two General Authorities. I also received indirect answers from two visiting General Authorities through stake presidents. The responses were all negative. Some leaders expressed regret. Others were appalled that I would even question the policy. Later, when official discrimination became so conspicuous that the black men were specifically excluded from an adult Aaronic Priesthood social to which wives were invited, I became even more distressed and spoke out again. Stake leaders acknowledged the unfairness to these men created by their policy but said they were bound by Church-wide practices. I finally expressed my concerns by letter to the First Presidency. The third principle — patience — took root here. My letter, which was hand-carried by a General Authority, was never answered. Meanwhile, I sought and received personal spiritual confirmation that my feelings were righteous and worthy.

A new job and my resultant relocation left the practical problem of accommodating black men in the Church to a successor. But for me the problem was no longer academic. I made my feelings known to my new stake president and he called me to the high council anyway. Patience was rewarded for many of us a decade later when the question was settled by President Kimball. One of the spiritual highlights of my life was sustaining one of my black friends to the Melchizedek Priesthood during stake conference the week of President Kimball's announcement. His revelation resolved the question in such a decisive way that even after a ten-year wait it gave heart to my growing appreciation of lay inspiration. Had those letters to Salt Lake contributed, however modestly, to the change? If so, communication is a two-way process, moving from the members to the general officers as well as in reverse. Not only does that process make members feel appreciated, but it also strengthens the Church. Like a tree, the Church is a growing, changing organism, receiving both nutrients from the roots below and energy from the leaves above.

I had fewer opportunities to practice my principles for dealing with authority conflicts until ten years following my move and release as bishop.

Church life during that period was relatively calm while I served in various teaching situations in a pleasant, congenial, small ward.

This ended when I was called to serve in that new bishopric and ran head-first into my stake president. It didn't happen immediately. We had inherited a substantial debt to the stake building fund due to an expansive stake building program and the limited fundraising success of prior bishoprics. As a bishopric, we decided to mount a four-year effort to wipe out the debt, indicating to stake authorities that additional assessments during that period would not be appropriate given our members' situation. The man who was then stake president agreed. His second counselor didn't. Two years later, that second counselor became the new stake president. I believe he was worthy in other ways, and he was certainly a successful fundraiser, but I found him extremely rigid and intolerant of disagreement. Concerned about the combination of a powerful position and a lack of flexibility, I voted not to sustain him when his name was proposed.

It was a timid vote. Despite apprehensions voiced by friends who held similar views, I did not think this man's name would be proposed. When it was, acting on impulse, I raised my hand in opposition, meekly and briefly. I didn't want my opposition to be acknowledged. I would have been satisfied simply to have left that meeting with my integrity intact. My astonished and embarrassed wife breathed relief when the General Authority went on, not noticing my half-raised arm. Then one of the other men on the stand nudged his neighbor, nodded toward me, and the General Authority was notified. He stopped, acknowledged the negative vote, and asked the dissenter to meet him in the corridor.

Next time, when the danger of such an impulse exists, I will not sit in the center of the congregation. As I rose and exited for all to see, I appreciated one of the assets of passive aggression — anonymity. We went to a nearby deserted stairwell, the only private place available. When asked the reason for my opposition, I said that I didn't think the proposed stake president had personal characteristics suitable for the job. The General Authority took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and said, "You may be right. I have recognized problems in his personal relationships during the selection process." He added that this man was the one the Lord wanted but commended me for having the courage to express my feelings. I was amazed at his frankness and was touched by his spirit toward me. I promised to support the new stake president. He then returned to the meeting and announced that the vote in favor was unanimous. After the meeting, I joined the line of well-wishers and told my new stake president that I had been the dissenter and that it was not a personal grievance. He was gracious in his brief exchange and indicated he had not taken it personally.

What could have been a devastating experience for me was inspiring and uplifting because of a sensitive General Authority who recognized and respected the value of communication from the ranks. As for other positive benefits, I know of at least one person (who had survived as a passive aggressor in the past) who has never been the same since. He has even surpassed me in

vigilance at times. It may be significant that I had never before seen a negative vote in the sustaining process but since have seen two in my stake. Whether I was an instrument or just a symptom of change, I do not know.

As far as I could tell, the new stake president worked hard on the personal, as well as administrative, aspects of his job. Our interaction, though limited at the beginning, was also cordial and positive — until the stake building fund resurfaced. Despite our truce with his predecessor, the new stake president insisted that our ward repay all of our debt plus an additional amount within the next year. This would have meant a building fund assessment equal to all of the ward's tithing for that year. As the member of the bishopric responsible for fundraising, I was caught in the middle, forced either to resist the assessment or to pass it on to ward members. Details of what followed are unimportant, but, while others were complaining covertly, I practiced my faith in communication. I wrote to the stake presidency protesting the decision and explaining my reasons. Otherwise, aside from frank discussions in bishopric meetings, I kept my feelings private. There was no response to my letter until that afternoon meeting between ward conference sessions.

My attempt to communicate in that meeting had obviously failed; and after the confrontation, I was emotionally incapable of further efforts in that direction. I (somewhat angrily) applied my second principle. I appealed to higher authority by writing to the regional General Authority, charging my stake president with unrighteous dominion and unchristianlike conduct. (This, by the way, happened to be the same General Authority who had met with me in the stairwell at stake conference.)

Once again the patience principle was tested. Having sent a registered letter to the man, I waited. After a month of silence, I wondered if General Authorities are instructed not to answer letters, especially those involving serious doctrinal or controversial issues. Such a policy would be understandable considering the pressures they experience and their lack of time to research individual issues. But my letter concerned a procedural process, the first step in a judicial action. I was angry and felt that I deserved a response.

Finally, I telephoned the authority, reminding him of my letter. At first he said that he didn't plan to act on my complaint because "we must stand behind our stake presidents." He had spoken by phone to the stake president and two of the stake officials present during our confrontation, and had concluded that I was in error. I expressed my dismay that he would form an opinion without contacting me or my bishop. I asked, "Do you mean that a member has no recourse against unrighteous authority?" I had seldom felt so frustrated. Here I was, a high priest, former bishop, and a stubborn, confident male, and I was not being taken seriously. I felt sudden empathy with many women in the Church.

At this point, the General Authority mellowed. He had now identified me from the stairwell conversation. He began to respond with honest concern to my arguments and promised not only to investigate further but also to communicate with me soon. With his recognition that I had a grievance, I was more willing to exercise patience. He, wisely, was more concerned about recon-

ciliation (and avoiding a nasty Church court action) than about the doctrinal position maintained by the stake president that Church members must pay specified building fund assignments to be worthy of a temple recommend. My bishop and I had wanted the General Authority to mediate between us and the stake president. He agreed to do so, if necessary, but encouraged us to resolve the differences without him. I don't know what he said to my stake president, except that he encouraged the president to resolve the conflict and return my temple recommend. I soon received a call from the president. He suggested that since I had always paid building fund myself, I was worthy of a temple recommend. He noticed that mine, which he still had, had expired and suggested that we do something about getting a new one. I pointed out that I still didn't believe stake building fund was prerequisite to a recommend. I added that I no longer felt supportive of him as stake president and probably did not qualify on that count. Neither of us budged, and we left it at that.

Even though he may not have considered the General Authority's intervention a chastisement, I felt justified and comforted in my doctrinal position. But I doubt that either of us was happy with our feelings. After several weeks of remorse, I asked for a meeting with the stake president, hoping to revive our personal relationship. It was a fascinating conference — one that vividly depicted the conflict outlined by Poll in his sermon on Iron Rods and Lia-honas.² The president believed that every policy defined prayerfully by any priesthood authority, including himself, was the will of the Lord. He felt that a member in good standing was obliged to obey whether he agreed or not. His interpretation of *sustain* clearly meant to obey without question. Based on past experience, I had come to recognize and appreciate the fallibility of local and General Authorities. This recognition, supported by Doctrine and Covenants 121, had led me to the more liberal interpretation of *sustain* — “to provide for or succor another.”

When my stake president alluded to my failure to endorse him, I pointed out that the voting process in the Church was originally much more open and thoughtful than it is today.³ I explained that I was really sustaining him more than most members of the stake because of my willingness to voice differences openly, whereas many, despite public acquiescence, were personally and pri-

² Richard D. Poll, “What the Church Means to People Like Me,” *DIALOGUE* 2 (Winter 1967): 107–17.

³ Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 7:458–60. At the last conference of the Church in Nauvoo, when William Smith's name was read for sustaining as one of the Twelve, Orson Pratt arose and disagreed. He spoke at length, telling why William should be dropped from the Council. When a vote was taken, the motion to sustain William Smith lost. The motion to sustain Lyman Wight was also debated. A. W. Babbitt spoke in opposition. Heber C. Kimball suggested that a vote be withheld until Wight could plead his own case. This compromise motion passed. In subsequent action, William Smith was also dropped as Patriarch, and at least one other brother was removed from a leadership position following arguments from both sides and a formal vote. The whole procedure reminds me more of a New England town meeting than the familiar rote process epitomized in the famous J. Golden Kimball motion to move Mount Nebo that received automatic and unanimous endorsement from a benumbed conference congregation.

vately critical. I pointed to the Mountain Meadows massacre as an extreme example of blind obedience and included some of my personal experiences with the issue.

He persisted: we must follow our leaders. He cited some familiar scriptures enjoining obedience. Doctrinally, it was obvious that we were at an impasse. He described my dismissal from the bishopric as necessary to avoid having people in the structure who did not support his policies. Removal of my temple recommend, he admitted, was done in desperation since my "doctrine" on Church contributions was dangerous, and other brethren present during our argument needed to know it could not be tolerated.

The stake president was genuinely surprised when I expressed my philosophy that if I acted according to my own spiritual confirmations, nothing enduring could be taken away from me. I contended that adherence to Christ's teachings was obedience to a higher authority than Church leaders. Even excommunication has only temporary effect and duration if done by one exercising unrighteous dominion. Suspension of a temple recommend, similarly withdrawn, had even less impact. The president, apparently seeing physical possession of a temple recommend as an objective index of worthiness, seemed dismayed at my feeling that I could survive spiritually without one.

During our discussion I asked, "What if the tables were reversed and I were the stake president?" He said, "There would be no problem because I would sustain you, regardless." We both laughed at the irony. Since I would be unlikely to revoke temple recommends, we could live together in peace if not in complete harmony. Communication did not make us agree, but at least we parted on friendly terms.

Patience solved my doctrinal problem in this conflict with amazing speed. Less than two months following the "Sunday Massacre," on 3 April 1981, the First Presidency issued a letter urging "leaders at all levels of Church administration . . . to further reduce financial burdens on Church members for contributions other than for tithing and fast offerings" and giving guidelines for dramatically reducing financial demands on members — including stake building funds. My bishop said, "Gael, that letter sounds as though it were written by you." Five months later, stake boundaries were realigned in northern New England. Interestingly, the General Authority scheduled to make the change was unable to come, and my stairwell colleague replaced him at the last moment. Under his presiding presence I was made a member of the high council in one stake that morning and my adversary was resustained as stake president in the other that afternoon. Since then, under a new bishop and in the new stake, I have again served as a first counselor in the bishopric. It is a testimony to the resilience and strength of the Church that people of diverse opinions can be accommodated in the same structure, even though congeniality is not always assured.

Unfortunately, I see some trends in the Church which promise to create even more distance between the roots and the "branches." No longer, as in my youth, is there a General Authority living "down the block" from most members. Distance creates lack of communication, which brings other hazards.

Assuming that our leaders are infallible is one of the most dangerous attitudes. Joseph Smith warned against this tendency when he said that he was but a man and the Saints must not expect him to be perfect. "If they should expect perfection from me, I should expect it from them," he observed wryly.⁴ Such a statement from the founder of the Church should serve to discourage the worship of leaders, but it is not a popularly repeated quotation in today's authority-conscious Church.

Another dangerous attitude that stems from veneration of leaders is the tendency toward total obedience. Supported by the extreme scriptural examples of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and Nephi's killing of Laban, the doctrine is often affirmed in testimony meeting when a member declares, "I will do whatever anyone in authority asks me to do; and if, by any chance, the authority is in error, the responsibility falls on him, not on me."

The pervasiveness of these attitudes is indicated by a number of policies and traditions: the ritual of passing the sacrament first to the presiding officer; the recently discontinued practice of forbidding women to pray in sacrament meeting; the general attitude expressed in Church literature that "priesthood correlation" is superior to personal inspiration; conversion success stories where the hero becomes a stake president, bishop, or Relief Society president but seldom a home teacher, Sunday school teacher, or Primary secretary; and the way *elder*, as applied to General Authorities, has assumed an air of elevation above *brother* or *sister*. A clerical costume even appears to be developing in the Church. The higher one progresses up the hierarchical ladder, the more likely he is to be found wearing the Mormon robes of a dark blue suit, white shirt, and dark tie, even when local custom, pure common sense, and comfort dictate otherwise.

These policies and others have in recent years increased the isolation of "The Brethren" from the membership until a permanent gulf threatens. Visiting General Authorities seldom speak intimately and frankly with members. Instead, almost all contact is with leaders or members under controlled circumstances. The attitude, expressed in the episode with my stake president, that the General Authorities must unconditionally support leading local figures reinforces the isolation.

The expansion of a middle bureaucracy, having little decision-making power but much resistance to communication from below, contributes hazardous static to the communication link. Some local authorities even imitate the General Authorities in isolation when distance does not demand it.

The communication problem is aggravated by an unfortunate attitude that it is wrong for lay members to speak up. I believe that harboring a disagreement quietly is an insult to a leader. Such repression assumes that our leaders are close-minded and arbitrarily unwilling to change. It also denies them information they may need to make a correct decision.

Even though communication between members and leaders is sometimes painful and difficult, I feel it is necessary to prevent the development of that

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5:181.

permanent gulf. Christ, an outsider as far as the hierarchical structure was concerned, recognized the legitimacy of that structure by adhering to Jewish principles and practices. Yet he attacked its corruption and sterility. Certainly, we are far removed from such degeneracy in the Church today, but silence or withdrawal can lead to the kind of apostasy and wickedness that Christ attacked.

A medical encounter I had suggests an interesting parallel with the Church. I underwent surgery to correct hearing loss sustained as a child. Recurring ear infections and a lack of adequate medical treatment had calcified the bones connecting the outer drum to the inner nerve. Nerves and their brain connections were fine; but because of immobilized linkage, certain sounds were muffled or inaudible. Like others who are hard of hearing, I was generally unaware of the problem and simply didn't miss many external sounds. The problem, however, was reversed when it came to internal vibrations. Chewing noises conducted directly by the skull bone were unnaturally loud, obscuring dinner-table conversations which were required to pass through the faulty audio linkage. A specialist, aided by trained assistants and modern technology, was able to remove the tiny inner-ear bones, refashion them, free the linkage, and replace them. This restored my hearing more nearly to normal, and now I hear sounds clearly that I had either forgotten or never known.

Within the wards and branches of the Church today, there is vibrant and exciting movement. Significant spiritual events occur continuously among lay members. Conditions are also healthy at the other end. Conscientious leaders, seeking to do the Lord's will, are pushing the Church forward. Yet sometimes the transmission system is calcified — inspiration outside the core is muffled while noises within the bureaucratic structure are magnified. Perhaps surgery is necessary. A little cutting here and buffing there would do wonders to let fresh, once-forgotten sounds vitalize the Church — the body of Christ — once again.