

Lester Bush's Journey as Seen by His Wife, Yvonne

Yvonne Bush

Those of you who have paid attention along the way know quite a bit about Lester's 1973 article, particularly because of the follow-up article he published in the *Journal of Mormon History* in 1999 that gave a detailed account of how he did it.¹ Additional details have continued to come forward. Since often I was the only other person "in the room," I offer my reminiscences and reflections.

Lester and I started dating when he was in his second year of medical school and I was still in high school. For some reason—I still don't have any idea why—he decided that I was going to be his girlfriend. But I knew, even at eighteen, that he was going to be my partner.

He was the only person in my life, up to that point, who took me seriously and looked deeper to know who I really was. He became my closest friend and confidant.

I also became his "project." I would find he would always have projects and plans, both short and long term. He took the summer before I went to Brigham Young University to educate me and promote my interest in politics, current and foreign affairs, history, and, of course, the burning issues facing the Church. He also warned me that BYU was a difficult place to be and that I had to be on my watch because it was all about getting a partner out there—and getting married—and I needed to pursue a more academic approach.

Even then, he was already researching resource materials on race/priesthood history and had started a file.

1. Lester E. Bush, "Writing 'Mormonism's Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview' (1973): Context and Reflections, 1998," *Journal of Mormon History* 25, no. 1 (1999): 229–71.

At this point, there was much talk about Elijah Abel and the curse of Cain. It was a big time. We were seeing Church statements come out, and intriguing rumors about Hugh B. Brown predicting the end of the policy. That was 1966. We were married the following year.

A year after we were married, we went to Salt Lake City for Lester's medical internship at LDS Hospital. It was a bit of a rude awakening to start a second year of marriage that way. He was an intern, so his hours were such that we didn't have much time together. Though he was tired and exhausted, he spent every moment he could in various libraries, in archives, whatever he could get himself into, talking to people and getting more and more material. I was taking courses at the University of Utah and remember not being very happy with the fact that I was not his project anymore. I was wife No. 2, if not No. 3, after his research and medicine!

When Lester was in Salt Lake City, he came across Stephen Taggart's small book on *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*.² Lester could see that his own research, to this point, was indicative of a more complex narrative. He got in touch with *Dialogue* and wrote an article in the winter of 1969 that was a commentary on Taggart's book.³ This was his first published work on the subject.

After his internship, Lester would spend three years in the US Navy, first being stationed in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and then a two-year tour in Cyprus (Middle East). While we were in Cyprus, he began to type and mostly complete his four-hundred-page compilation of resource material on race and the priesthood. However, he wanted to

2. Stephen G. Taggart, *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1970).

3. Lester Bush, "A Commentary on Stephen G. Taggart's *Mormonism's Negro Policy: Social and Historical Origins*," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 4 (1969): 86–103.

do more than just have a compilation. My diary entry from July 1971 says,

The other day, Lester was reading a *Dialogue* advertisement that they planned to do a special issue on minority groups. . . . This, once again, stirred him to [want to] write a definitive article on the Church and The Negro. I know that this is so important to him. He wants to do something well and authoritative; he also wants to be of some service to the church on this matter and help facilitate some change in policy, hopefully. He also wants to get through with it so he can pursue other matters. I told him that I would support him and help him when I could. . . . So today, he asked me to “hang in there” and help for six months. I think this is asking quite a bit, since the baby is due in three and there is so much to do beforehand. However, I have given the matter some thought, and I think it would be better for me to do as he says. I think this will result in a stronger emotional and spiritual bond between us when he realizes that I love him enough to help him in every way. It will certainly be a challenge.

While in Cyprus, Lester never stopped. He kept getting letters and information from here and there, from his brother Larry, from every place he could, to keep the door of information open. Those were the six months he was hoping I could hang in, the six months when he started typing it all up and putting it together chronologically into his compilation.

He really hoped his work would help the Church move forward. He thought that if he knew and understood the issue, it would be OK—that we would have a better understanding and be able to problem-solve things. This was his main thing. He wasn’t interested in being polemical or forcing the Church to do this or that. He wanted to work within the system and be able to effect change if that was possible.

There is a letter I came across recently that he wrote to his brother Larry at around this same time. Larry was outraged about what was going on in the Church. I didn’t see Larry’s letter; I was just reading Lester’s response. Lester went through each of Larry’s concerns. It was

really beautiful. He wrote of his belief and faith in the gospel, that as far as problems with the Brethren were concerned, there were good things there, and we shouldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. Then, he wrote, "To me, operating from within feels much more comfortable. Nobody has ever made a significant impact on the church from without, excepting the U.S. Congress, the Supreme Court, and a handful of assassins."⁴

While we were in Cyprus, we were visited by President Edwin and Sister Janath Cannon, who were presiding over the Swiss mission, which included Cyprus. Sister Canon took a keen interest in Lester's work, and after months of correspondence between them, Lester gained her trust and support. Lester presented her with a bound copy of his mammoth compilation. She, in turn, and with Lester's permission, sent it to Elder Boyd Packer with the hope that it would help move the Church forward. In a note to Lester, she said, "I will be rather glad to be relieved of the responsibility of personal possession of this treasure. It's a little like owning the Hope Diamond—one's pleasure in gloating over it is always dimmed by the vague fear of disaster."⁵

But instead of welcoming a documentary source unlike any the Church had ever compiled itself and handing it over to the Church Historians to review, Elder Packer apparently "shelved it" until receiving a lengthy letter from Lester in April 1972. This letter detailed his search to understand the historical and substantive development of Church policy. Lester also included a copy of his prepublication *Dialogue* article. What ensued were urgent phone calls and a remarkable window of opportunity for Lester to meet with Elder Packer in Salt Lake City. Since that history was already presented in Lester's 1999 article, I won't dwell on it here.

Only to say, and I remember as if it were yesterday, that when Lester returned to Saigon (where we were later stationed), he started right

4. Letter dated Aug. 1971.

5. Letter postmarked Nov. 14, 1872.

in, recounting the hours he spent with Elder Packer, almost before he put his bags down! With a rueful expression and a furrowed brow, he said, “It went OK. I wasn’t kicked out, but curiously he told me I was a ‘unique duck.’”

Lester took this to mean that Elder Packer didn’t know *what* to think of him or his work. Perhaps it was an indication that Elder Packer could not reconcile questions raised in the upcoming article with Lester’s obvious and sincere willingness to discuss and even incorporate Elder Packer’s suggestions should there be “anything which is particularly out of order.”⁶

In the autumn of 1972, while transitioning from Cyprus to Saigon and months before his meeting with Elder Packer, Lester had conversations with two editors of *Dialogue* that resulted in him moving from the compilation to what he called “A Short Historical Overview of the Negro Doctrine.” Most of the writing was done in Saigon over a period of what he called “four exhaustive, prayerful months.”⁷

During all of this (while in Cyprus and Vietnam), Lester was also very active in the Church. He was the leader of the small LDS group in Nicosia, and then the second counselor in the Saigon branch presidency. In Saigon, he aided the efforts to advance the “Vietnamization” program in all the Church auxiliaries (at the time, there was no American serving in a position higher than second counselor), per the mission president, Bill Bradshaw.

While we were there, things opened up—there was a ceasefire—and then with a lot of preparation, missionaries could come in. Preparation and planning were Lester’s responsibilities, along with two other American contractors who were his “buddies in arms.” They had a whole list of things they sent to the mission president that needed to be put in place before the missionaries would be safe and able to work once they “landed.” Though the climate was hot and humid, Lester insisted that

6. Letter to Elder Packer, Apr. 16, 1973.

7. Letter to Bush Sr., 1973.

“for their health and well-being” they needed to play football with him regularly! The mission president also joined in the games during his visits.

While all of this was going on, Lester continued to frantically work on his article. A two-hour “siesta” provided him enough time to rush home, eat a quick lunch, and then pound away at the typewriter until rushing back to the clinic. The clacking of the typewriter would resume after dinner and well into the night.

Once the article was published and we returned home from Vietnam, “plans and projects” continued at a frenetic pace. Lester settled into work at CIA headquarters and was the associate editor at *Dialogue* from 1977—when it moved to Virginia—to 1984, when it moved to Salt Lake City. I believe *that* was the most gratifying, exhilarating, and happy period in his life. It was just an exciting time. Lester was a prolific contributor to Mormon history literature. He published two articles in 1976, one in 1977, one in 1978, five in 1979, and ten more between 1981 and 1998.

In 1983, Lester accepted the commission to write *Health and Medicine Among the Latter-Day Saints* (a book commissioned by religious historian Martin Marty). Around that time, Elder Mark Petersen of the Quorum of the Twelve initiated what became known as the “Witch Hunt” that attempted to intimidate LDS scholars. Petersen compiled a list of people who he considered “problems,” and those people were named and dispatched if possible.

I remember Lester getting that call to say that Bill Marriott, president of the Washington DC Stake, wanted to talk to him. He hung up the phone, and I could see the situation was clearly anxiety-provoking. We fasted, and he prayed to have the ability to be able to convey his sincere intent to bring understanding, not discord. Lester told me afterward, with great relief, that President Marriott was open and willing to let him go through his findings in detail. The meeting was very friendly and there were no repercussions for Lester at the stake level, unlike for others on Elder Petersen’s list.

However, there were repercussions for Lester at a “sub-rosa” level. Lester supported our boys in their callings and Scouts, but other than the occasional request to substitute teach elders quorum, there were no official callings or active fellowship offered. Eventually, Lester felt that he would do more harm than good if he did participate. He said, more than once, “How can I honestly sit quietly while misrepresentations or just straight-out untruths are being promulgated, even if innocent, without standing up and voicing a more truthful understanding?” Moreover, he did not want to harm another member’s testimony.

Ironically, I believe if he had been welcomed and given a calling, he would have made it work with all his might and mind. But no one ever asked him. Only later did we find out why.

Shortly before moving to California, I went to our bishop for a temple recommend. He asked, “How long has it been since your husband was disfellowshipped?” This was 2017. I gasped and answered, “He has never been disfellowshipped. That confuses me.” He said, “Oh, that’s just been the general knowledge handed down.” This just broke my heart.

The bishop subsequently came by and talked with Lester. They talked and talked, and the bishop came by more than once to get to know him. He asked Lester if he would be willing to take on an elders quorum assignment, but by then Lester was sadly not able to entertain such an offering. It now generated too much anxiety, as he was experiencing the effects of moderate dementia. If it had only been twenty-five years earlier, that would have been great.

From 2000 to 2015, when Greg Prince asked for his collaboration in writing a *Dialogue* article on “Gerontocracy and the Future of Mormonism,” there was a seemingly unaccountable break in Lester’s research and writing.⁸ This was puzzling to me until I realized he still had been very much “knee-deep” in his projects. He could hardly wait

8. Gregory A. Prince, Lester E. Bush Jr., and Brent N. Rushforth, “Gerontocracy and the Future of Mormonism,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 49, no. 3 (2016): 89–107.

to finally retire from the agency so he could work on his and my family histories.

In his usual obsessive-compulsive way, he didn't wait. Efforts to access library materials and historical societies and to take field trips got seriously underway by the year 2000, only interrupted by world events such as 9/11 and its aftermath. In 2015, he finished the "Snow/Dean Family History," a comprehensive, detailed, and compelling narrative filled with genealogy charts, census data, illustrative appendices, and footnotes—a lasting gift of incomparable value to me and my whole family.

Furthermore, upon retirement from the CIA in 2005, he convinced himself and the agency that with all the resources he had available to him at the agency, and a good working knowledge of the medical department over the past thirty years, perhaps he could come back as a "contractor" and write the history of the Office of Medical Services—a history from which he said he would have greatly benefited as director. It should only take a year or two.

Ten years later, after exhaustive work, he finished an eight-volume history that began with the Office of Strategic Services (the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency) and extended through the 1990s. You can be sure it had more footnotes than narrative! Only one of the eight volumes is unclassified, and it is titled, "The Fighting Doctors of the Office of Strategic Services."

Sadly, Lester's cognitive faculties were noticeably on the decline by 2015. However, he looked forward to attending the study group sessions and dinners with invited Church leaders and scholars at Greg and JaLynn Prince's home. It was a critical thread that brought him a sense of community and fellowship. Furthermore, through Greg's heroic efforts, opportunities for healing and light were brought back into Lester's understanding of his life's journey.

The first was in 2015, when Lester was invited to give the Sterling M. McMurrin Lecture at the University of Utah. This is a prestigious, endowed annual lecture. At first, he hesitated to accept the honor since he had been away from the field for so many years. He said, "I just don't

know if it's right, whether I should do this." I would always say, "You can do this. This is a true honor, and this will be a good thing for you to do." As it turned out, he was so pleased that after all these years, "Rip Van Winkle awoke," and he found that his work was being acknowledged as relevant.

More light and healing as we had dinner with Marlin Jensen and Greg Prince prior to the lecture that evening. In my diary, I wrote of the dinner that it was "singular and profound." Elder Jensen could not have been more affirming, and the effect on Lester was visible. And the lecture was wonderful. It was the first time Lester and Darius Gray met—a truly historic event.

Lester's spirits continued to soar the morning after the lecture, when Lester and Greg had breakfast with Elder Jeffrey Holland. My diary note said, "Breakfast with Elder Holland—confirming beyond any expectation." That evening, Lester and I walked around Temple Square, retracing our steps from the night before we were married and recounting the overwhelming emotional impact of the last two days. It was clear Lester felt that his life and work did have meaning and was seen as a valuable contribution. That's when Lester said, "Maybe *this* was my mission. Maybe this is why I was meant to do this work."

This brought all the goodness back together. His hope to bring light, truth, and understanding was realized. That was just a beautiful moment for me. I truly believe that it was for him as well.

More light and healing occurred three years later, when Lester and Greg traveled together to the fortieth anniversary celebration of the 1978 revelation. The morning prior to the celebration, they went to the Church History Library. Upon hearing that Lester was in the building, Elder Steven Snow, who was then Church Historian, came down from his office and spent several glorious minutes with Lester, letting him know how great his contribution to the Church had been and how grateful he was, personally, to have had the privilege of meeting with Lester.

Though the light would fade from Lester's eyes, I believe that the heartfelt acknowledgement of the contribution of his life and work brought sustaining light and love to his spirit and heart.

Being able to look back over the past fifty-plus years of this journey with Lester has been a gift to me and has given me even more appreciation for his dedication to truth and his mission. He never once expressed bitterness or regret nor lost sight of his faith or the support and encouragement from his fellow scholars and devoted friends.



The Impact of Lester Bush's *Dialogue* Essay

F. Ross Peterson

When I received a copy of *Dialogue* volume 8 in the spring of 1973, my mind was immersed in Watergate, Vietnam, and civil rights. Lester Bush's article on the evolution of a policy relative to any individual of African heritage was a capstone in my personal journey relative to Black Mormons and the priesthood. There is no doubt, each paragraph felt like intellectual "manna from heaven" that filled my soul with promise. The journey had not ended, but a gauntlet had been tossed gently into the halls of 47 East South Temple Street in Salt Lake City.

My struggle with accepting second-class citizenship in a Christian religion based on Jesus' teachings started early. I found it impossible to get my head around a judgment coming out of the premortal existence that determined a person's status at birth. On its best day, the Old Testament and the Pearl of Great Price, save predictions of the Savior's birth, test my concept of a loving God. When I was a ninth grader attending seminary, the instructor was explaining how the King James Bible was put together. I wondered who made the decisions about what to put in and what to leave out. So, I chose to work on the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus the next year.

Five years later, in 1962, as a missionary, I found myself forced to look the policy on race and the priesthood squarely in the eye. Professor