IN WISDOM AND ORDER

ENDURING TO THE END . . . IN JOY

By Jim Sawyer

SEVERAL YEARS AGO while recovering from depression, I found solace etched on a classroom wall at the Catholic university where I work. The inscription read: "The Glory of God is you, fully alive." It evoked for me some favorite Mormon scriptures, particularly D&C 93:36 ("The glory of God is intelligence") and 2 Nephi 2:25 ("men are that they might have joy"). Often I have pondered the significance of what it means to be fully alive and have concluded that it is anchored in transcendence.

Many recovering alcoholics encounter the transcendent in the realization that their lives have become utterly broken and beyond their control. Somewhat like an addict, I believe that in our separation from God, each of us has some portion of our life that is beyond management, beyond the bounds of control.

Only as we understand and fully face our human condition do we ultimately discover God's gift for us. Amidst the craziness of our personal Gethsemanes, glimpses of the transcendent offer us hope by showing us new pathways out of dysfunction and pain.

This is the lightness of being that Nephi celebrates as he emerges from melancholia: "Awake, my soul! . . . Rejoice, O my heart . . ." (2 Ne. 4:28). This transcendence, I believe, is pure gift; it is universal, infinite, and free. Mormonism teaches that this gift is purchased by "the Holy Messiah, who. . . shall make intercession for all the children of men" (2 Ne. 2:8–9).

THAT WE MIGHT HAVE JOY

UTAHNS, and perhaps Mormons in general, appear to have a corner neither on transcendence nor joy. As has been widely reported, a recent pharmaceutical study reveals that the state with the highest rate of Mormon affiliation also has the nation's highest rate of antidepressant use. As I have pondered this discontinuity, I have begun studying the Church's control structure, especially the aspects analogous to the organizational studies I assign students in my graduate course on control theory in nonprofit organizations. Although I recognize that depression is a highly complex subject and the insights that tools in my field of study can yield are, at best, only one piece of this puzzle, my hypothesis is that because the outcomes some Church programs produce are at times significantly at variance with scriptural and provident living goals, depression often results. For instance, rather than fostering a culture that is supportive of individuals becoming "fully alive," certain Church programs encourage members, and male members particularly, to "endure to the end" in mortal struggles that seem foremost to serve the ends of the organization and that may actually preclude encounters with the transcendent rather than fostering them. Arguably, this partially explains the inordinately large number of Latter-day Saints who seek chemical help for depression.

THE MODEL

A "control structure" is the manner in which an organization translates its values into behavior. Effective organizations such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are particularly adept at directing this relationship. It begins with strategic planning through which the organization clarifies its values, even as it identifies and responds to "threats" and "opportunities" in its operating environment. From this, the organization distills, refines, and re-clarifies its mission. The organization then translates its mission into various discrete behaviors, called "programs." "Programming" is the process of designing, operating, assessing—then redesigning—an organization's programs.

A generic example I use in my course is church-related. For instance, a church may have "saving souls" as a principal value embodied in its mission statement. This hypothetical church might then "translate" its mission into the design of discrete programs—such as Sunday school instruction—that embody the goal. However, although the goal is quite useful for strategic thinking, it lacks the kind of specificity needed to guide the implementation of that program. For implementation, leaders will craft "output-oriented objectives" to stand in place of the more general "outcome-oriented goals."

One important virtue of objectives is that they facilitate comparison between "planned" and "actual" performance. For instance, an output objective for the coming year might be to increase Sunday school attendance twenty percent, again in support of the goal of saving souls. After a period of operation, however, program "numbers" may have underperformed with regard to the numerical target. So, for the next programming "round," the Sunday school program may be fine-tuned to increase its chances of meeting the objective. Or perhaps the output targets may be lowered from twenty percent, to, say, ten percent; or the objective might be completely rewritten or even scrapped.

Unfortunately, the use of output objectives may foster an unintended result. That is, objectives may facilitate the measurement of attributes that are somewhat different from the goal-driven attributes. Alternately stated, our hypothetical church may count those who attend Sunday school, but is it justified to assume attendees actually become "saved"?

Note the "act of faith" involved here: the church is exercising faith that achieving a desired output (raising the number attending Sunday school) will actually create the intended outcome (increasing the number of saved souls). Non-profit organizations—churches included—almost always operate in faith that if the requisite output is produced, the desired outcome will follow. Realistically, the link between outputs and outcomes is often tenuous—perhaps more tenuous than many organizations acknowledge publicly, due to their concern for loss of public support.

CHURCH CONTROL STRUCTURE

THE modern precedent for formal programming systems within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

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Saints began in the 1960s with what was then called Priesthood Correlation. In the '70s, formal strategic planning identified a three-fold mission: to proclaim the gospel (missionary work), to perfect the saints (ongoing Church work and spiritual development), and to redeem the dead (temple work). In turn, elements of this tripartite mission began to, and still do, serve as outcome goals for various Church programs. A typical mission-driven goal might be for all adult priesthood holders to be temple-endowed. An example of an output objective connected with this goal might be for ten percent of those currently unendowed adult priesthood holders to receive these temple ordinances in the coming year.

The Church's semi-annual general conference is an important gathering at which members are admonished to strive ever harder in pursuing gospel ideals and attaining the goals laid out through specific Church programs. Conference talks, however, rarely impose measurable objectives, such as boosting convert baptisms by a certain percentage. It is at the local level that program objectives are set and output is measured and reported.

Most Church programs operate at the ward level, with a typical ward consisting of about 400 members, presided over by a bishop who serves approximately five years. At the stake level, however, the control structure becomes instrumental. Stakes typically contain seven or eight wards and are led by a stake president who serves approximately ten years, and who is assisted by two counselors (as is each bishop). The high council, whose dozen members regularly visit wards to teach, encourage, and strengthen members, as well as to ensure conformity with standardized programs, is a stake oversight body that reports to the stake presidency. Stake leaders also receive from wards monthly reports that include the number of members eligible for participation in any program and the percentage not currently participating. Annual ward conferences include progress reviews and resetting numerical targets for each program. The performance of stakes is assessed by regional representatives and visiting general authorities, with evaluation criteria that include such things as the number of convert baptisms, the percentage of stake members paying a full Church tithe, the percentage of members attending sacrament meeting, and the percentage of males worthy to be called to stake leadership positions.

In effect, "follow the living prophet" becomes a call to "follow Church programs."

The progress of individual adult members toward mastering Church programs is primarily measured at the temple recommend interview at which members answer standard questions pertaining to such things as their conformity with the commandment to pay a full tithe, their personal ethical behavior, and whether they sustain the Church's leadership. The same questions are repeated in a follow-on interview with a member of the stake presidency, who then countersigns the bishop's signature attesting to the member's "good standing." Members are also expected to meet with the bishop at year's end to declare the payment of a full tithe, which declaration becomes part of the permanent Church record.

When Church programs are administered in love by charismatic stake and ward leaders, the "organization culture" may be buoyant, particularly during times of expansion. But a "corporatist" culture may also prevail, particularly in areas that fail to produce ever-higher program outputs.

Faithful members sustain the Church as the literal manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth and pledge unwavering support for its programs and leaders. When the several programs are administered in love by charismatic stake and ward leaders, the "organization culture" may be buoyant, particularly during times of expansion. But a "corporatist" culture may also prevail, particularly in stakes and wards that fail to produce ever-higher program outputs. For instance, during the economic recession a decade ago, the president of a western Washington stake chastened his congregation in the presence of a visiting general authority. He noted that the stake leaders were aware of the economic difficulty some were experiencing but stressed that tithing is a commandment and admonished them to continue to pay a full tithe regardless of their circumstances. His counsel came across as: "Please don't look for excuses or plead exceptions because of hardship. Just follow the program, and you will be blessed."

This arguably insensitive counsel is remarkable for two reasons. First, particularly in austere economic times, this "move the wagons" organization style was neither refuted nor softened by the General Authority who followed him at the podium, implying concurrence. Second, in the weeks following, the stake president's comments did not become the object of recrimination by economically struggling members. Perhaps they blamed themselves for not producing individual outcomes "as worthy" as those of some other members, and therefore they suffered in silence. Mormon faithful are particularly motivated to maintain temple eligibility, and failure to qualify for attendance at marriages and sealings may provoke emotional upheaval in the absentee's family. Indeed, fear of the denial of temple blessings might be the ultimate linch pin in the incentive system undergirding the Church's control structure.

Mormon converts may be attracted initially to the Church by its more-humanist messages that seem devoid of quantitative values. And many, of course, look favorably upon the "engineered" lifestyles that many of their Mormon friends and acquaintances display. Yet once baptized, converts are immediately introduced into the Church control structure with the challenge to set a goal, with a date, for attending the temple. "Set a goal—set a date" is a corporate-style "management-by-objectives" strategy, the end in this case being to make converts temple-ready within as little as a year. A danger, of course, is that some members may attain the ultimate output objective of temple attendance without attaining the essential "a-ha" outcome of a truly transcendent experience.

MY EXPERIENCE

I GREW up during the 1950s in Ogden, Utah, in a part-member Mormon family. My mother was not actively participating in the Church during those years, and my father was somewhat antagonistic toward Mormonism. In fact, when my older brother received his mission call, my paternal grandfather had a heart attack on

the spot, followed by my father disowning my brother for a period of time. Religious differences weren't the only things that made our family unique, however. My parents were good and committed people, but they were affected, one by depression, the other by manic-depression.

Yet amid all the turbulence of my chaotic family life, I received a great deal of love and support from the good people of the Mount Ogden Ward. When I reached missionary age, I hesitated, particularly because of my father's influence, but through the ward members' encouragement and example, I eventually chose to serve. Even so, I have tried since then to live in accord with a worthy promise my father extracted from me before I departed. He had me promise that I would never make a choice merely because someone else was guiding me, that I should never decide on something without studying the options and choosing thoughtfully for myself and for those who depend upon me.

At Seattle University, I discovered that the Jesuits (an order in the Catholic priesthood) advocate essentially the same path of discernment as the one taught by my father. Indeed, it is the path of discernment taught broadly in many liberal arts academies, and it is a philosophy by which my children know me. But I lament that, too often, it has been an approach to life that has not served my children well in their Church experiences, leaving them confused and angry at times.

I have also observed several Mormon males in my extended family who have lived fully and faithfully by institutional values, yet in many ways their lives reflect despair rather than transcendence. With regard to my family, I conclude that, at times, the control structure of the Church subverts more-humanistic paths toward discernment, often with deleterious implications for transcendence. And I believe this conclusion stands in opposition to the emphasis upon free agency in Mormon doctrine.

CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

FOLLOWING a recent reclaiming of its Christian roots, I use the term "humanism" in reference to that call felt within us all to color outside—as well as inside—of the lines. Humanism, as used here, acknowledges the craziness and chaos through which we must frequently pass. And yet it offers hope for transcendence, holding that as we abdicate our futile attempts to fully manage our lives, we may come into a right relationship with the divine. When this happens, we can become new creatures, knowing what it means to become "fully alive."

Most nonprofit organizations in the United States, including churches, evolved to become demonstrably more humanistic during the twentieth century. But, arguably, the LDS Church seems remarkably untouched by this shift. Its "command and control" structure continues unabated, analogous to the way it operated in the latter half of the nineteenth century, despite a fledgling humanist renaissance during the presidency of David O. McKay in the 1950s. The rationale for extending a nineteenth-century "move the wagons" organizational culture into the present seems to be the Church's literal belief that the "keys" of administering the kingdom of God on earth pass by revelation through an unbroken succession of Church presidents. This faith entails the conclusion that God's will becomes known to us through heeding the counsel of his oracles, the prophets, whose messages are passed down to Church members through hierarchical priesthood channels.

Some humanist-oriented members, however, find this command and control structure disempowering. They seek more institutional democracy and less-engineered lifestyles as precursors to a more-open organizational environment and, ultimately, to more-transcendent outcomes. This proposed humanist path does not stand in opposition to the idea that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is literally the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. It does acknowledge, however, that the Church's control structure may not always be inspired, and that it is not infallible.

A colleague who teaches organizational behavior reflects this perspective. She reminds her students that humility is the tolerance of imperfection, in ourselves, in others, and in the organizations through which we are bound together. Indeed, hers is a perspective reflected in Paul's writings when he observes that "we see through a glass darkly" (I Cor. 13:12). Organizational control, even in the Church, is analogous to this cloudy vision. In our struggle to link program outputs with program outcomes, humility calls us to acknowledge that perhaps achieving worthy goal *x* may not be as directly linked to participation in program *y* as we may want to believe—and we must therefore constantly remain open to insights and corrections that may filter in from more transcendent realms.

Organization theorist Peter Senge counsels organizations wishing to attain optimum performance to adopt what he calls a "learning" profile. A learning organization empowers its members to act as autonomously as possible, and it continuously incorporates their acquired knowledge to improve its performance. When such an evolution occurs, says Senge, key personnel may reconfigure their efforts away from micromanagement toward bolder strategic leadership. I believe this kind of humanizing strategy Senge suggests is compatible with Joseph Smith's comment about his own preferred leadership style: "I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves."

CONCLUSIONS AND CONUNDRUMS

THE conundrum, of course, is that there seems to be no space for any significant humanization of the Mormon control structure. The divine mission of the Church is presented as self-evident: the Church's mission is to continue to perform the work in which it is engaged. This is a concrete undertaking. The ironclad linkage between output, outcome, and mission leaves little room for organizational introspection, and therefore little room for transcendence for those who adhere strictly to the organization's precepts.

Has the Church painted itself into a corner? Mormon faithful appear more and more as "organization people" clinging tightly to a corporate model of how to work to win eternal life.

In a sense, then, the Church may be a victim of its own successes. On the one hand, it is flooded with new converts—many from developing nations choosing Mormonism as a literal self-help path out of despair. These victories have a flipside, however, causing disillusionment among many humanist-oriented converts and members who seek more institutional democracy, more transcendence, and less-engineered lifestyles.

But the Church has painted itself into seemingly hapless corners before, on issues including polygamy and access to the priesthood by certain people of color. No other mainstream American religious organization has better demonstrated openness to paradigmatic shifts without losing track of its core values. In the end, it is core values that serve as beacons to the disaffected and the distraught. Perhaps the Church will transform itself, again, through revelation, to reach out more effectively through its core values to Christian humanists even as it presses ever more diligently to bring the disenfranchised of the world into the light of the gospel.