

BUILDING BONDS BY BREAKING BARRIERS

Rev. Dean Jackson practices what he preaches and connects religions in Utah Valley

by Jeanette W. Bennett
photography by Kenneth Linge

My delete button has worked overtime trying to start and restart this story on Dean Jackson. Should I begin with his relentless devotion to numerous Utah Valley organizations including the Provo Rotary and Intermountain Healthcare? Do I talk about how he led Rock Canyon Church through a repentance process for their Mormon-bashing? Or should I start with how he moved his Sunday services to the movie theater at Provo Towne Centre — complete with a popcorn bucket for a collection plate? I can't leave out this pastor's love for motorcycles and black leather. And did I mention the six-page article in Christianity Today titled "A Peacemaker in Provo"? Truly, Dean Jackson cannot be pigeon-holed. And ironically that's a lesson he's been driving home to Mormons and non-Mormons alike since his heart experienced a rebirth in 1998. People are not one-dimensional, and Dean sits on dozens of boards and speaks at numerous events to build relationships in the community and to eliminate unhealthy labels. But surprisingly, one word he doesn't want connected with his pursuit for peace is "tolerance." "We tolerate road construction and bad weather," he says. "We don't tolerate people. That's not good enough."

The Problem

When Dean was assigned to come to Utah Valley 15 years ago to be the pastor at Rock Canyon Church, he immediately sensed a chasm between the 90 percent of Utah Valley residents who were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the 10 percent who were sprinkled across dozens of small churches or no church at all.

After growing up mostly in Japan and having a strong sense of the Christian world view, Dean was frustrated that Utah Valley had religious landmines even though most claimed to be Christian.

"The most painful thing was feeling like I was being tackled by my own team," he says. "It's painful to watch people who say they believe in God and want to help people turn their lives around, and yet they get upset when someone is trying to do that same thing but in a different way than they are used to."

The Reconciliation

Dean inherited a congregation of about 100 faithful. Before long, his likable style and persistence added believers, with more than 300 attending the services on Canyon Road on an average Sunday.

Dean says Rock Canyon was the fastest growing church in the valley in the mid-'90s, and he started looking for land to build a bigger church. But his heart told him that numbers weren't the only thing God was concerned about.

"The church had some historical outlooks toward Mormonism that were negative," he says. "And I could no longer let myself and my church continue to base our discussions on how the LDS are wrong."

Dean and other leaders at Rock Canyon created a document that in essence said, "In the past we have not been Christlike, and now we are pledging to live our lives as Christ's ambassadors and to stop acting negatively toward the LDS Church and its members."

On Nov. 29, 1998, Dean invited many of his LDS friends to be in attendance for the "reconciliation" where he unveiled the document to his congregation and asked them to repent. Carl Bacon, who is now the Provo LDS Temple President, as well as author Stephen Covey were

at Rock Canyon that Sunday along with more than 100 other LDS faithful in a standing-room only meeting to show appreciation for Dean and his efforts to close the religious divide. But not everyone approved of his approach, and his congregation dropped in half after the “reconciliation.”

“It was the worst time in the world from a logistical and financial standpoint,” he says. “Finances were coming in and we had quite a staff at that time, but after I called us all to repentance, the tithes dropped off.”

But Dean only had one regret.

“If I had done it earlier, it wouldn’t have been as painful,” he says. “I knew it was the right thing to do.”

Although some accused Dean of pulling a publicity stunt, he sharply disagrees.

“The last thing I wanted was to be the next CNN controversy,” he says.

Moving to the mall

A combination of financial problems and a desire to reach more people led Dean to move his Sunday services to the Cinemark movie theater at Provo Towne Centre in late 2003.

“We’re trying to get away from the church being about the pastor or about the building,” Dean says.

When people attend a church for the first time, it can be uncomfortable — there are unfamiliar religious symbols, it’s confusing as to where to go and where to sit, and you don’t know where the bathrooms are.

“The theater is a safe place because we’ve all been there and feel at home there,” he says.

Ten years ago, there were only 10 churches in the nation doing off-site services, according to Dean. Now there are more than 1,000 who meet in non-traditional locations.

“We’ve definitely had more visitors and more new people than we had in the previous six or seven years,” Dean says. “I have people come up to me and say, ‘You have no idea how hard it is to go to another church. This feels comfortable to me. It feels like there aren’t any tentacles attached to coming here.’”

Those who are “religious-challenged,” as Dean says, also don’t like going to a church where they don’t know when it will stop.

“They hate to go somewhere that an hour turns into two hours, which turns into three hours,” he says. “We are precise. We start at 10 and we’re done at 11.”

To keep on pace, there is a red digital count-down clock in view of the speaker that ticks down the minutes and seconds.

For those who want a little more than 60 minutes of worship, a second theater is open as early as 8 a.m. for prayer, meditation and communion. A third theater is dedicated to a children’s service. And a nursery, complete with background-checked volunteers, is in a blocked-off section of the theater hallway. Parents are given restaurant-style beepers that let them know if their child needs them during the service.

Dean takes advantage of his environment and uses multi-media in his sermon. One recent Sunday he showed a clip from “Ace Ventura: Pet Detective” and then walked down to the front of the room with a miner’s light strapped to his forehead to talk about finding light in one’s life.

Visions

One of Dean’s dreams is to one day build a new home for his church that is more “office complex” than “religious icon.”

The building would have offices for the church operation as well as a music and video studio. Organizations such as nonprofits could rent out the meeting hall on Mondays through Saturdays. “Having a church building sit empty all week is not a good financial model,” Dean says.

Other items on Dean’s to-do list include using technology to help spread the word.

“I see God as ‘open source’ and not ‘proprietary,’” Dean says. And he means this both literally and figuratively. He wants to develop technology-based religious experiences that defy geographic boundaries. To start, he envisions a videotaped sermon that would be rebroadcast at perhaps five different places around the county.

The day job

Dean is taking what he's learned in a religious and social context and translating it to the corporate world.

The Jackson Consulting Group, LLC, (www.thejacksonconsultinggroup.com) offers a two-pronged approach. First, Dean helps businesses and individuals who are moving to Utah survive and thrive in our culture by having the right expectations as they arrive.

"Businesses in Utah Valley sometimes struggle to bring in the talent they are seeking because they can't convince people to look past the religion factor," he says. "My greatest strengths are with CEOs and corporations to help them get and keep people. It is a waste of money to bring somebody here and then have them leave in six months because they never felt comfortable." The second part of Dean's consulting business includes "life coaching" for those who aren't new to Utah County but continue to have problems and need a listener or a mediator for their concerns.

"I listen and help them identify what the true issues are," Dean says. "If they feel like they are hitting a brick wall or being railroaded because they aren't LDS, I help them work through the situation. Often, they are assuming the problem is religiously based and it is actually something completely different."

Measuring success

This pastor hasn't turned the percentages around in Utah County — Mormonism is still the dominant religion. But he measures his success in other ways.

"Fifteen years ago when non-LDS people would say they don't like it here, Mormons would say, 'Then why don't you move?' And it came across cold," he says.

Dean also thinks the Olympics were a big turning point, but not in the usual "people got to see Utah" perspective.

"It forced Utah people to look at themselves and honestly ask some questions," he says. "People were asking, 'How are we coming across? How are we perceived?'"

Personally, Dean has experienced growth by joining more boards and coalitions than perhaps any other person in the county. When Dean first started getting invited to sit on boards, people told him he was just "a token non-Mormon."

"I'm sure sometimes that was true," he says. "But why did they keep asking me to do things? I think it's because I really tried hard to do what I was asked to do and nothing more. Then they saw me as safe. They knew I wouldn't take advantage of the situation. And that has given me credible relationships in this community."

And now his roots in this valley are too deep to leave.

"I've had calls from what I consider to be flattering places, and they would have made my personal life easier and my financial life easier," he says. "But at the end of the day, while living here is extremely challenging, there are so many rewarding things about it." UV

DEAN'S 5 MODERN-DAY PARABLES

Rev. Dean Jackson's conversation style includes a modern-day use of analogies to make his points and explain his perspective.

The restaurant

Let's say your best friend opens up a restaurant. You go there and have poor food and poor service. When your friend asks how the dining experience was, you may say, "I love what you're doing. My food was a little cold and the waiter was obviously new, but overall it was great and I'm going to get others there and help you succeed."

However, if you have a bad experience at a restaurant where you have no personal connection, you will tell others how awful it was.

The point

“When it’s about someone I know, it’s about them,” Dean says. “When it’s someone I don’t know, it’s about me.”

In other words, we need to get to know each other so we can avoid negative talk. Even if we don’t agree on everything, if we have a relationship we will strive to speak positively about each other as well as help each other grow and reach our potential.

The bus

Dean tells of a friend who left Mormonism and began to “throw rocks at the bus,” trying to derail the cause of Mormonism. After several years, this friend realized he had not been able to change the direction of the bus. Ironically, Dean says at times he brings his congregation onto the “Mormon bus.”

“When Mormon people are working on a humanitarian project, I say, ‘Let me on the bus,’” he says. “When the bus goes to places like the temple, I can’t go there. But I tell them, ‘When I can get back on the bus, let me know. I’d love to work on projects with you.’”

The point

We should spend our energies finding common ground rather than trying to stop others from achieving their goals.

Mt. Timpanogos

“We all know what Mt. Timpanogos looks like from Utah Valley,” Dean says. “But if we see it from another angle — from the air or from the side, we may not recognize it.”

The point

Don’t assume others see life the same way you do.

“I’ll admit I don’t know what life is like for a middle-aged black man,” he says. “I don’t totally get it because I see life from my own angle, but life looks different from other perspectives.”

BYU/UVSC

BYU and UVSC have different campuses, reside in different parts of town and have different approaches to academics. Neither school feels threatened by the other. In fact, they are glad the other is there to fill the needs of the community that they can’t fill.

Dean likens the LDS Church to BYU — naturally — and his church to UVSC.

“If I said I was going to build a better BYU and that someday there won’t even be a BYU, I would be laughed out of town,” he says. “But if BYU represents the LDS community, where is the equally strong UVSC?”

The point

Utah County has a need for more than BYU — and for more than the LDS Church. Dean sees his religion as an alternative choice in Utah Valley.

“And we’re not just another LDS ward — Gentile style,” he says. “We know we are different, but we don’t expend a lot of energy fighting Mormonism because it meets the needs of many people.”

The credit union

No matter which credit union you put your money in, it is still valid money that can be used to make purchases.

“If you deposit your relationship with God in our church, we think that deposit is just as valid as it would be if you deposited it in another bank or another church,” he says. “The bottom line is when we stand before God he won’t ask us what church we joined. He will ask us what we did with his son.”

The point

Dean doesn’t think God is proprietary. He believes he is “open source,” which means God is accessible to anyone who seeks him, and it is between God (open source administrator) and the individual — not proprietary religions — where individuals will spend eternity. Dean believes God is reaching to everyone and is doing all he can to remove man-made proprietary barriers.

DEAN'S 10 TIPS FOR ENDING THE RELIGIOUS DIVIDE IN UTAH COUNTY

1. Don't let the conversation end.

Don't stop talking to each other if you hear the words, “I'm not interested in joining your faith.” Relationships should not be agenda-driven.

“People are dumping people left and right if they aren't able to achieve their agenda,” Dean says.

2. Don't whine.

“There's way too much whining,” Dean says.

People need to ask themselves if they truly have big problems.

“I'm tired of people complaining that they can't get coffee in Utah,” he says. “Sometimes it's good to experience different approaches. We should appreciate all of the good things we do have and take the opportunity to learn about new ways of doing things.”

3. Be curious.

“I wish people would come to Utah like they were going on an exotic vacation somewhere,” Dean says. “If I took someone to Japan, they'd learn about Buddhism, take pictures, and go home telling people all of the interesting things they learned.”

Dean says too often people are afraid someone is going to try to convert them so they don't show interest in another religion.

4. Be soft.

Dean uses Proverbs, one of his favorite books of scripture, to make his point.

“A soft answer turneth away wrath. It's how you respond more than what you say,” he says. “I'm convinced that we can say just about anything we want to say to each other if we have a relationship and do it the right way.”

5. Let children of different faiths be friends with each other — and adults, too.

Don't stop your kids from getting to know those of different faiths. When the dating years come, still encourage friendships, although Dean knows the ol' “you marry whom you date” adage. And he agrees.

“I want my kids to marry someone within our faith,” he says. “That's an important thing. Life is complicated enough without bringing different beliefs into a marriage.”

Dean encourages adults of different faiths to go to dinner and invite each other to be part of their lives.

"I can go out to dinner with my LDS friends and have good fellowship with them and learn from them," he says. "Put relationships in place, and that will lead to interesting discussions."

6. Identify what the negotiables

and non-negotiables are.

"Try going to Japan and wearing your shoes inside wherever you go," he says. "Soon they'll be talking about the rude Americans. Taking shoes off is a non-negotiable there."

Dean says the non-negotiables here include being respectful of religious icons, religious institutions and specific religious language.

"I've learned to have a sense of respect and an understanding of things I can't make light of that others hold dear and holy," Dean says. "If something is fundamental to who someone is, what is the value of slamming it?"

For example, Dean learned that Monday nights are a big deal in Utah County.

"If I want to do a project that involves Mormons, I'm going to be respectful to their Mondays. And I've taught my people to be sensitive to that," he says.

7. Don't demonize any group because it causes an 'us vs. them' environment.

Every major conflict the world has ever seen involved the sides demonizing each other.

"It's not honest or integrous to do that," he says. "And more importantly, once you demonize a group of people, the rules change and you can behave in a dangerous way."

8. Work and live in the same area.

"I know many people who are not LDS who work in Utah Valley but live in Salt Lake," Dean says. "This isn't fair to either side. The LDS people need to get to know people outside their faith. Their kids need to have others in their schools. And those who are not LDS need to live by LDS people and build relationships that way. This would help both sides be more comfortable with each other rather than compounding the problem. It is one thing to work together and another to live together."

9. Don't be easily offended.

Dean says both sides can get offended too easily.

"This isn't the only place in the world where people get offended," he says. "I've been offended everywhere I've lived. There is no Perfectville."

10. Take a history lesson.

"If you want to go deep with people, understand their history," Dean says. "People's history is huge, and if you don't take the time to get to know someone's history, you can't understand them now."