

The Bravest Woman in Utah

Sandra Tanner, an ex-Mormon, has been introducing other mormons to the real Jesus for 42 years. And she's not going to stop now.

In 1964, Jerald and Sandra Tanner began their full-time outreach to Mormons in their 13-room Victorian house on West Temple Street—just two miles down from the gleaming Mormon Temple. From there, they grew Utah Lighthouse Ministry into an outreach known around the world—famous to the evangelical world and infamous to Mormons.

Now, though, Sandra is facing perhaps her greatest test of faith. After more than 40 years of working with Jerald, Sandra announced she is the sole leader of the Salt Lake City-based ministry, as Jerald officially retired as a result of his battle with Alzheimer's disease. This put Sandra over a publishing company, a bookstore and a popular Web site, , which are all aimed at reaching Mormons and those interested in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) with the true gospel of Jesus.

It's going to be a stretch, but Sandra says she's up to it. "I'm a middle child, so growing up my nature was not to make waves or be confrontational," she says. "I've grown in that area over the years. It's not uncommon for LDS members to call me up and tell me off or come into the store and try to goad me. I've learned not to let how people view me affect how I feel about myself."

Sandra lives in the midst of a people who would like her to skip town—and take her "heretical" ideas with her. She says Mormons regularly send her scathing e-mails. In an effort to sink her ministry, two copyright lawsuits were brought against

the Tanners, one by a Mormon and one by the church itself. Several LDS Web sites are devoted to debunking her.

All this invective for someone who as a young Mormon girl (the great-great-granddaughter of famous LDS leader Brigham Young) wanted nothing more than to grow up and become a Mormon wife, raise a brood of Mormon children, work hard to live a righteous life and, if successful, earn a spot as a goddess alongside her husband-turned-god on a planet of their own inheritance, producing "spirit children" into eternity.

Those are some of the falsehoods she now devotes her life to defeating. "Just yesterday afternoon, I spent two or three hours on the phone with a woman on the West Coast who was heartbroken because it had just dawned on her that Mormonism wasn't true," Sandra says. "Someone's got to be here to talk to these people and give them the support and information they need."

It continues to be grueling work, done on a shoestring budget. Sandra and Jerald are authors of more than 40 books on Mormonism, many of which point out the religion's historical and theological contradictions. Through her Web site, Sandra communicates with people around the globe who are questioning Mormonism's claims.

And this doesn't count the unplanned work that drops onto her lap. Many Christian college classes take trips to Salt Lake City just to visit with Sandra and quiz her about Mormonism.

"The Tanners, pound for pound, year after year, have been the most successful opponents of the church," admits Daniel Peterson, professor of Islamic studies and Arabic at Brigham

Young University. "I don't mean it as a compliment."

Despite the vitriol from her critics, Sandra insists that hers isn't an anti-Mormon ministry. "This is an outreach ministry to those people struggling with issues surrounding Mormonism," she says. "I get calls all the time from heartsick parents whose children have converted to Mormonism and they can't come to their wedding in the Temple. I have people depending on me."

Although she is pulled in many directions, Sandra says her relationship with Jerald has never been better. "We have put aside our petty problems," she says. "Things I used to let aggravate me about Jerald don't bother me anymore," she says.

"For example, Jerald has never been the nattiest dresser. It's just been irrelevant to him. Now when he comes over to the bookstore and his shirt is mis-buttoned or he's wearing three sweaters and a wooly hat, it doesn't faze me at all. I'm just so happy to see him. This truly has been a time of growing closer."

Yet she knows she's also growing apart from her husband of 45 years as his Alzheimer's progresses. "It's very hard to see someone you love dissolve," Sandra says, choking back tears. "God has been preparing me for the day when he won't recognize me anymore."

Now Sandra does double-duty, leading the international ministry and caring for Jerald and their house. "In the morning, Jerald needs help showering and shaving," Sandra says. "He doesn't remember how the electric shaver works. I have to dress him. He doesn't remember which item to put on

first. He understands a conversation you have with him, but the mechanics of life, and his years of research have left him.”

Family First

Through the years, the Tanners have seen hundreds of people leave Mormonism for a personal relationship with Christ. But the couple has also seen miracles at home. All three of the Tanners’ adult children are following Christ, though they struggled with the ire their parents’ ministry created in the community.

“I just tried to encourage them,” Sandra says. “Would they have liked to have parents who weren’t the archenemy of the community? Of course. But I think they all see that the Lord used all their trials to build their Christian character.”

Many Christian youth struggle to fit in with their peers, but the Tanner children—April, 44; Dennis, 43; and Teresa, 41—had it worse than most. “Back when I was in grade school,” Dennis says, “the teacher would start the first day of school by asking, ‘OK, class, who is LDS in this room?’ Most of the hands would go up except mine. Then they’d find out my last name was Tanner.”

In high school, the LDS parents would push their kids to date only other LDS children and to attend only the dances at the local ward. “The Mormon kids would be friendly but not friends,” Dennis says. “They’d be as nice as they could when they were trying to bring you to church, but once they saw you didn’t show any interest, they wouldn’t waste time on you.”

Sandra and Jerald made a point of gathering the family each night to study the Bible together or read from missionary biographies. And they attended church as a family several nights each week.

Like most Christian parents, Sandra was watchful for ungodly influences on her children. One time, Dennis joined a Cub Scout pack and the den leader saw a wonderful opportunity to convert a Tanner child, so he started pumping Dennis full of the Mormon doctrine of multiple gods.

"One morning, Dennis came into the kitchen and said, 'Mom, is there really just one God or lots?' I said, 'Dennis, let me show you a verse.' So I showed him Isaiah 43:10-11, which says: '"You are My witnesses," declares the Lord, "and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me no God was formed, nor will there be one after Me. I, even I, am the Lord, and apart from Me there is no Savior."' He just said, 'Oh, that settles that' and went out to play."

When the children got older and sports and extracurricular activities ate up their time, Sandra and Jerald stopped the devotions and instead stressed the quality of their lives as an example to their children. "By taking the stand that they did," Dennis says, "they really set the tone for all of us."

Sandra also has seen several of her relatives come to Christ. As 2004 closed, Sandra's mother accepted Christ from her deathbed. She had been raised Mormon but had become disillusioned with it in midlife and eventually gave up believing in anything.

But as she lay in the hospital, ravaged by pancreatic cancer, Sandra says the Holy Spirit touched her mother and she embraced the message her daughter had been preaching most of her adult life. Now, Sandra says, she has confidence she'll see her mother in heaven.

She believes her experience is a lesson for all Christians. She says reaching unbelieving relatives boils down to following God's leading, being genuine, having a working knowledge of Christian doctrine and showing love with one's actions.

When her Mormon grandmother died, Sandra says her church organized the post-funeral dinner for the largely Mormon family. Sandra's sister was impressed with this outpouring of love for a family that didn't even go to that church. This, coupled with other encounters with Christians, eventually brought her to Christ.

In the final analysis, though, it's the Holy Spirit's job to bring a non-Christian relative to Christ. A big part of this is how the Spirit reveals to non-Christians their rebellious nature and their need of God's forgiveness, Sandra says.

"A friend of mine would regularly invite a Mormon neighbor over to have coffee and chat," Sandra recalls. "Mormons aren't supposed to drink coffee, but this Mormon woman felt safe inside my friend's house where no one would see her.

"One day, the conversation came around to the problem of sin. My friend was trying to get across to this woman that even though we are sinners, Christ gave His life for us. The Mormon woman lifted up her cup of coffee and said, in all

seriousness, 'This is my only sin.' Non-Christians do not understand the depth of their alienation from God and thus fail to appreciate the greatness of Christ's atonement."

Sandra says when Christians live in openness and authenticity before non-Christian relatives, their loved ones see that they still struggle with the "old nature"—but that the Holy Spirit brings them through the battle. "Your family watches you," Sandra says. "When they see that we have the confidence to go back to God and ask for forgiveness, it will touch them."

Embracing God's Grace

Sandra says it's easy for her to fall into the trap of perfectionism—fretting that she's not doing enough. It's at those times, though, that she's reminded of the faith she left, which was based on being acceptable to God through one's performance, and she takes hold of God's grace.

"I never heard John 3:16 until after I was married and had become a Christian," Sandra says. "The concept of salvation simply by repenting and believing in Jesus is foreign to Mormonism. Mormons earn eternal life through performing various LDS temple rituals and good works.

"Even as Christians, though, we can forget that God is offering us His love, not His condemnation. The average Christian has a lot of demands on himself or herself, and that can become a great struggle of feeling like you haven't done all that you could have done."

After years of ministry, Sandra has learned the importance of keeping a good sense of humor. "I don't know how many times

I've been counseling someone in the bookstore when I look out the window and see one of those particular Mormons who loves to goad me into arguments come walking up the drive," she says.

"All you can do is laugh and lift up a quick prayer. When you can laugh at yourself, it keeps you from becoming too important in your own eyes."

She's also learned to trust God. "It's a matter of staying close to the Lord and staying open to what He brings into your life," Sandra says. "Jerald's Alzheimer's wasn't on my agenda. But I've learned through experience that everything, even the things that seem wrong or negative, come from a loving Father's hand. Look for God's grace, and it will find you."

John Draper is a freelance writer based in Seattle. He has studied Mormonism for several years and looks forward to opportunities to share the gospel with Mormons.