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The Image Building Program of the Church

Wendell J. Ashton
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Editorial Note: At Brother Ashton's request, a summary of his talk is published rather than the complete text.

"When Dr. Wright said that I am currently the managing director of public communications, he didn't know how truthful he was when he said 'currently.'" Brother Ashton pointed out that the public communications department of the Church is only four years old. He was called in 1972 to organize and to direct the department. *"We're doing a lot of pioneer work in the Church today,"* he said. *"I'm currently the managing director, but I don't know that I'll still be managing director when conference is over. But we're having a lot of enjoyment in this assignment."*

"There are many challenges for us, as well as for people who are working in the public relations program of the Church in helping the world to know more about what we as Latter-day Saints really are." He illustrated by telling about a call he had had recently from a friend who is a businessman in New York. The friend had told him that there was an article in the *New York Times* that morning that he would want to see. Brother Ashton called "our man in New York" and asked him to put the article on the teleprinter. He indicated that it quite upset him because this article was written by a *New York Times* reporter who had interviewed Brother Ashton the week before. He had come to Salt Lake saying that he wanted an appointment but also indicated that he was going to make some other contacts.

"When I saw him, he said that he had been talking to others in the community, I could tell that those with whom he had been talking had not given him what I thought was a fair or an adequate picture of some of the social changes going on in our community."

Brother Ashton quoted the reporter as saying, *"I get the impression from some of these interviews I've been conducting that there is quite a falling away from your Church here. There is quite an erosion in the loyalty of your people and there are more and more 'Jack-Mormons'*

jumping around town than there have ever been before, and the numbers are increasing markedly."

Brother Ashton responded, *"We're certainly not free of dissonance, but I think the facts would not bear out what you've been told."*

Brother Ashton pointed out to the *Times* reporter that when President Kimball became a member of the Twelve in 1943 there were fewer than a million members in the Church. Now we have nearly four million members. *"But,"* he said, *"They are numbers. What is perhaps more pertinent is the fact that when President Kimball became a member of the Twelve in 1943, the percentage of attendance world-wide of all Church members, including Jack-Mormons and dissidents, at our weekly worship service, which we refer to as Sacrament Meeting, was 17%. Presently with nearly four times as many members, the percentage is more than 38%."*

Brother Ashton acknowledged that we do have challenges and problems in the Church but that if one looks at the record, it is obvious that we are certainly not having an exodus from the ranks of loyal members of the Church. He pointed out that this *New York Times* article did not include anything about what he had said concerning the positive side of the picture, but instead was published with a picture of West 2nd South and the headline, *"Liberalized Views Changing Mormon Haven."*

He arranged for a luncheon appointment with one of the top executives of the *New York Times* to help correct the misimpression left by that article.

"It isn't as much of a fight as it has been in the past trying to get the news media to see us for what we really are, including some of our problems and some of our challenges, but certainly the tilt of this article was not what I felt was an accurate picture, particularly after we had pointed out some of these things on the positive side."

"Another challenge," said Brother Ashton, *"is that of counteracting the tendency on the part of the television networks to present programs that show an increase in*

violence and sex. It is not just the fact that this is so, but also the indication that there are changing patterns in American life which are alarming."

He illustrated with previews he had seen of forthcoming TV shows and also by quoting from an article that appeared in an Atlanta, Georgia newspaper that indicated that a man who had been charged with murder, rape and kidnapping had spend much of his time in an adult bookstore. Three alleged pornographic paperback books he obtained from the store were introduced as evidence in the trial.

"I don't need to remind you of this great plague," said Brother Ashton. He told about being asked by the woman commentator on one of the local television stations following an interview, what, in his opinion, was the biggest problem facing Salt Lake City?

"I didn't even hesitate. I said, 'I think the biggest problem we have in Salt Lake City is obscenity.' It's one of our greatest challenges to America."

"Here again I think you good people with your solid background in the Church and your professionalism can do a great deal in your circles as well as with the public in pointing out the menace and the problems of pornography, as Dr. Victor B Cline has done and is doing.... Your voices are needed — not only in your own professional journals and publications, but with the public generally."

In introducing one of the areas in which the public communications program of the Church is active, Brother Ashton quoted a line from the Psalmist, *"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"*

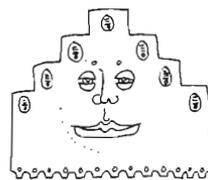
"Since the gospel of Jesus Christ was restored a century and a half ago, most of the earth's surface has been 'a strange land' for the teaching of his restored message. But as the Church comes out of obscurity in increasing areas of the world, the way is being prepared for greater missionary harvests. . . . Our greatest obligation, our greatest duty is to help prepare the way for more productive missionary work."

He then told of a statement made earlier this year by the mother of Diane Lynne McDonald, a student at BYU, who in 1974 was Miss Teen Canada, and whose parents are not members. Her mother said, *"Why can't the people of Canada know you good Mormon people for what you really are?"*

He told of a visit by President Tanner and Elder Monson to Toronto in connection with a premier of a new motion picture about the Mormons, in June 1976. *"As a result of their visit, there was a veritable windfall of newspaper, radio and television reports — not only in Toronto, but across the whole dominion. We just had a*

wonderful harvest of stories in the largest newspapers of Toronto, the National publications and on National television."

"But the image building, the bringing of the Church out of obscurity is extending far beyond Canada. Thanks to the Bicentennial, the Church has been featured on national television (in special reports or special features) in the following countries that we know of, and perhaps in others: Australia, New Zealand, Samoa, Canada, Belgium, Denmark, Japan, Sweden and Great Britain." He said that the Mormon Tabernacle Choir programs are now carried by over 1,000 radio and television stations around the world. He also pointed out that the total world-wide coverage concerning the Church in newspapers around the world is well over four times what it was four years ago.



"Much of this coverage is the result of the work of 904 public communications directors and coordinators serving on a Church service basis in 53 different countries." He added that here in the United States, several major magazines have published excellent articles this year on the Church. *Family Circle, TV Guide* and *Guideposts* have all carried feature stories.

Brother Ashton, with the help of Brent Lawrence, then gave some samples of a new series of radio, homefront announcements that are being released, as well as a sample of three new television spots. *"Last year 670 commercial television stations, or 93% of all commercial television stations in the United States, carried homefront spots . . . The radio homefront spots were aired by 3,300 stations, or 49% of the total radio stations in the United States, all without cost to the Church for this time. The total value of the air time last year exceeded \$12 million dollars in these homefront announcements."*

"We're also using sacred and historic pageants and musicals to sing the Lord's song. Seven of these productions across the nation this year have attracted 390,300 people, 39% of them being non-members of the Church. Our hosting services are giving personalized attention to distinguished visitors to Salt Lake City from this country and abroad. During the first six months of this year, we hosted 7,960 VIP's from 35 different countries."

Brother Ashton then quoted another scripture, this one from the Doctrine and Covenants (58:64): *"For*

verily the sound must go forth from this place unto all the world and unto the utmost parts of the earth." He then told about the forthcoming one-hour television family special, *The Family and Other Living Things*, which he said would be released in 54 top markets of the United States in November. He also pointed out that a booklet on Family Home Evening would be offered free to viewers.

"Public communications is also working closely with the committee on Visitors Centers. We create the displays. The latest, the Washington Temple Visitors Center, was opened in July by President Spencer W. Kimball. Brother C.L. "Kenny" Stoker, director there, reports that an average of approximately 450 visitors visited the Washington Temple Visitors Center each day during the summer. More significantly, an average of 39 non-LDS visitors daily left their names and addresses. Of these, an estimated 55%, or about 20 person each day, when called by the full-time missionaries were favorable to being taught more about the gospel."

Brother Ashton then quoted another scripture, this one from the Book of Mormon (Enos 1:10): *"I have given unto them this land, and it is a holy land; and I curse it not save it be for the cause of iniquity..."* "The First Presidency and the Twelve," he pointed out, *"continue to urge members of the Church, as citizens, to involve themselves in fighting the encroachment of iniquity, obscenity, abortion, liquor, and other corrupting influences. Quietly but persistently, we encourage efforts against these insidious inroads."*

Brother Ashton then summarized, *"We in public communications humbly are striving to contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God in three ways: first, by building the image of the Church; second, by assisting the missionary effort through a marketing approach; third, by combatting moral pollution. And so may I say in conclusion that we hope you professionals in this field, who know the subject of moral pollution so much better than we do will use your energies to join with us in a public relations effort to tell our fellow citizens and our fellow members of the Church of some of the real pitfalls and hazards and dangers of these elements in our society, that would take us back to the days that we read of, in Sodom and Gomorrah."*

Brother Ashton closed with a prayer that the Lord will bless us in our professional efforts.

"May the Lord bless you in your leadership, and in your teaching, and in your counseling, because certainly you're working with the most precious things on earth, human lives."

"May the Lord so bless you, and bless us all that we may do what we can with all our intelligence and energy to point out the message that the Lord's plan of living is not only the divine plan, but it's the happy way. It's the way to bring about stronger and more peaceful and substantial individuals, greater families. And when families are great and strong, of course, the nations are going to be greater and stronger. May the Lord so bless us, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."

But behold, that which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, everything which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God.

Moroni 7:13