

## **SISSEL KYRKJEBØ AND THE MORMON TABERNACLE CHOIR**

### **My introduction to Sissel**

It was in December of 1986, Colleen and I received a Christmas card from our dear Norwegian friends, Bente Bakken and Jan Åke Karlsson. Included was the newly released CD by Sissel. It was Sissel's first album, and its title was her name, "Sissel. Bente was an excellent musician and said Sissel was Norway's new singing sensation. Bente explained Sissel performed during the intermission of the [Eurovision Song Contest 1986](#) in May 1986 and she became an immediate hit. In our home we also fell in love with Sissel's voice and music. Our family had a tradition of me fixing Norwegian pancakes each Saturday morning. I would also put on Sissel's album and kept it playing for most of each Saturday morning. As a result, we followed Sissel's career and bought each new CD as soon as it was released.

### **Meeting Ole Bjørn Kringstad, Sissel's first manager**

In October 1987 President Jay Hyer died, while serving as the Norway Oslo Mission President. To Colleen's and my surprise, I was called to be the new mission president. We left Utah on January 4<sup>th</sup> and arrived and delightfully assumed our responsibilities on January 5, 1988.

I couldn't have been happier. I had to pinch myself each day to assure myself of being in Norway as mission president and that it wasn't a dream. It was so much fun to see old friends and meet new to be friends. It had been twenty-five years since my father was mission president. The first *Lys over Norge* magazine article about me was entitled, "In His Father's Footsteps," focusing on the double meaning.

Later in 1988 my missionaries in Bergen shared an experience they had with a man named Ole-Bjørn Kringstad. They said Ole-Bjørn worked for Norwegian television. Ole-Bjørn stated that the Mormon missionaries were very visible, particularly with how they dressed in suits and white shirts. He said many Norwegians were curious about the Mormons but didn't want to invite the Mormon missionaries into their home. Ole-Bjørn asked if our Church had a recorded presentation about our Church that could be shown on Norwegian television.

When the missionaries asked me, I told them I wasn't aware of a video presentation that could be given to Ole-Bjørn for that purpose. I contacted the Norwegian Country Director of LDS PR and asked. He wasn't aware of anything. I next contacted the Executive Secretary for the European Area Presidency. Brother Richards wasn't aware of anything, but recommended I contact Brother Richard Lindsey at Church Public Affairs Department in SLC. Brother Lindsey was not available, so I spoke to his assistant, Kathleen Lubeck, whom I had known at BYU. She explained the Church didn't have such a video, but Brother Lindsey was proposing to the Brethren such a video should be made. She asked me to write a letter directly to Brother Lindsey talking

about Ole-Bjørn's inquiry and giving support to Brother Lindsey's proposal. I did. (And later I helped with some of the filming for the video in Norway.)

I telephoned my missionaries in Bergen asking them to tell Ole-Bjørn that such a video didn't exist, but we anticipated one would soon be created. I also asked if the missionaries would arrange a luncheon meeting with Ole-Bjørn for the next time I came to Bergen. Ole-Bjørn worked in Norwegian Television, I thought he would be a good man to know and with whom to cultivate a friendship.

On my next visit to Bergen, I had lunch with Ole-Bjørn at Hotel Norge. During our conversation I learned Ole-Bjørn was the person who first found Sissel and became her first manager (part-time). When Sissel's popularity took off, Ole-Bjørn said he felt Sissel needed a full-time manager. He suggested Rune Larsen and Rune became her first full-time manager. Coincidentally, during our luncheon Rune Larsen needed to speak to Ole-Bjørn and he came to speak to Ole-Bjørn. It gave me a chance to meet Rune. During our luncheon, it was so interesting to learn more about Sissel.

I thoroughly enjoyed Ole-Bjørn. He had such a warm and friendly personality. He got a kick out of the missionaries continually referring to me as "The President." In subsequent telephone calls, I would begin by identifying myself. Each time, he would reply, "Is this the President?" "Yes, this is the President, and the President would like to speak to you." We became dear friends and continued the friendship until he died in 2009. Just a few weeks before his early death, I hosted Ole-Bjørn and his wife, Ranveig, to dinner and then to the BYU Young Ambassadors' Bergen concert. When I learned of Ole-Bjørn's death, I wrote to Sissel and expressed my condolences. Within a few minutes I received a reply from Sissel thanking me for letting her know because she didn't know Ole-Bjørn had died.

### **My first approach to the Tabernacle Choir**

In February 1998 I was contacted by one of my missionaries, Rob Jones, recommending Sissel sing with the Tabernacle Choir. I wrote a letter to Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, who had first line responsibility for Europe and Norway. Elder Holland forwarded my letter to Wendell Smoot, who was then the President of the Choir. I received a telephone call a few weeks later from Brother Smoot indicating their appreciation for my recommendation, but he and Gerold Ottley, Choir Director, felt Sissel was a pop star and didn't sing the genre of music they were looking for to sing with the Choir. He thanked me for my recommendation but indicated they would not proceed with my recommendation. I was disappointed, but felt it was worth the try.

### **John Langeland's idea to approach Norwegian Television about airing "Music and the Spoken Word"**

In November 1999 I received a telephone call from John Langeland. He began by saying, "Erlend, I think you and I should go to Norway." I replied, "John, I would love to go to Norway with you. Why would we go?" John continued, "The Church has been trying to get the Tabernacle Choir on Norwegian television for thirty years and they

haven't succeeded. I think we should go and do it." I then asked how he thought we would succeed. He replied, "Through your connections." He then gave a longer explanation as to how we could and should proceed. I replied I wouldn't go unless we had permission from the "Brethren." He replied he wouldn't go either without the First Presidency's permission. John said, "I will call President Monson and get permission." I responded that when he had permission we could talk further.

The next day John telephoned and said he had visited with President Monson. John said President Monson liked the idea, but he wanted to discuss it with President Hinckley first, so he had put in on the First Presidency meeting agenda for the Temple meeting the next day. I next heard from John on Thursday afternoon. He said, "The First Presidency approved his proposal, but they wanted to clear it with Elder Holland before giving us the go ahead, since he was the member of the Twelve with responsibilities for Europe. However, Elder Holland was in South America, so they couldn't talk to him until he returns." The following week I received a telephone call from Brother Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency, telling me that John and I had been approved to go to Norway. Brother Watson also gave me the boundaries in which we were to operate.

John and my hopes were to meet with Einar Førde, the General Manager of NRK. We decided the best approach would be for John to send the letter, telling us of his background, and proposing to meet with him. The letter was sent, but we didn't get a reply. I pursued contacts with Einar Førde's office without a response. I had hosted at BYU Hakon Dahl, Director of Religious Programs for Norwegian radio. I contacted him and asked if he would visit with the secretary Einar Førde about the appointment. The answer came back that Einar was too busy, and he wasn't interested in broadcasting the Tabernacle Choir. He, therefore, would not meet with us. That was a disappointment, but not unexpected!

John Langeland suggested we contact Kåre Volebrokk, General Manager of TV2. We were able to arrange the meeting and we met with Kåre Volebrokk. The one-hour meeting was very cordial. Kåre had us leave the materials we brought, and he said he would be in contact with us. A month later we received the reply saying that TV2 was not interested. However, six months after that John received a letter from Tom Brevik, director of Religious Broadcasting for TV2 expressing some interest. So, John and I flew back to Norway to meet with Tom. Again, the meeting went well, but at the conclusion Tom said, "The Mormon Tabernacle Choir broadcasts should really be on NRK." We told him we had tried, but not succeeded. He said that instead of going to Einar, we should go to the middle-management, where broadcast decisions were really made. He said he would help us make that connection, but we never did. Instead, another door was opened.

### **Meeting John Bernander, the new General Director of Norwegian Broadcasting**

In 2000 Espen Amundsen, Norway Country Director of LDS Public Affairs, recommended I bring Valgerd Svarstad-Haugland, Norwegian Minister of Culture, to

speak at BYU. When I was in Oslo that October, I met with Her Excellency and her husband, Geir, at the Norwegian Parliament building. I extended an invitation to Valgerd to speak at BYU. Valgerd accepted the invitation at the conclusion of our meeting, and we determined she and Geir would come to Utah in February 2001.

During Valgerd's visit to Utah I learned that Norwegian National Broadcasting reported to the Ministry of Culture. I told Valgerd about John Langeland's and my attempt to meet Einar Førde. I told her that Einar refused to even meet with us. Valgerd's response was, "That was rather rude of him." Since she had said it, I agreed: "I thought so, too."

Shortly after Valgerd's visit to Utah, Valgerd contacted me about the leadership change at Norwegian Broadcasting. She said Einar Førde had stepped down and John Bernander had been appointed the new Director-General Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). Valgerd asked if I would like to meet John Bernander and follow-up on the agenda John and I wanted to address with Einar Førde. Valgerd said she would arrange the meeting for the next time I went to Norway.

On my next meeting trip to Oslo, I met with John Bernander at NRK. I was grateful for the meeting. John was very open and friendly. He was willing to talk about the possibility of NRK broadcasting "Music and the Spoken Word." John also accepted my invitation to visit Utah and lecture at BYU. The date was set for October 3-6, 2002. I was delighted that John and his wife, Sigrun, could come on a General Conference weekend, so he could get a closer exposure to the Tabernacle Choir.

During our visit I learned why John had such a favorable attitude toward the Tabernacle Choir. John said his parents moved to the United States after World War II and settled in Long Island, New York. John was born there and thus carrying dual citizenship being both American and Norwegian. John said his father loved the Tabernacle Choir and during their years in New York, his father listened to the Tabernacle Choir every Sunday morning. In addition, John told me his younger sister, Linda, attended BYU Hawaii in 1981 at Hotel Management which she eventually left to finish her master's degree at the Stavanger Hotel School of Hotel Management in Norway. She was the Deputy Managing Director of Choice Scandinavia and she had recently become CEO of "Tusenfyrd," the largest amusement and theme park in Norway, just outside of Oslo.

John and Sigrun arrived in Salt Lake City the afternoon of Thursday, October 3<sup>rd</sup>. They stayed at Little America Hotel in SLC. John lectured at BYU to the students in the School of Communications on Friday morning and had lunch with Norwegian students attending BYU and returned Norwegian missionaries. In the afternoon we went to SCL and met with Bruce Christensen, President, and Iain McKay, representative for the Tabernacle Choir from 3:00-5:00 p.m. At 5:30 pm I took them to a dinner at the Joseph Smith Memorial Building with:

- Elder Ronald T. Halverson—Member of the Quorum of the Seventy, Norwegian ancestry; owner and CEO of Halverson Manufacturing; and former mission president to Norway; and his wife, Linda
- Mac Christensen—President of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and his wife, Joan
- Craig Jessop—Music Director of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, and his wife,

RaNae

- Gabriele Sirtl—Europe Area Public Affairs Director
- Kim Farah – Church Public Affairs
- Michael Purdy—Public Affairs, and his wife, Jennifer
- John Langeland (Bergen)—Businessman, former honorary Norwegian Consul; former Norwegian mission president; former president of the Stockholm temple; and knighted by H.M. King Olav, and June L. Pearson
- Norman Shumway—Public Affairs, and his wife, Luana

After the dinner I took John and Sigrun to the annual SLC Norwegian Missionary Reunion. John was delighted and enjoyed visiting with the missionaries who had served in Norway.

Because of jetlag I let them sleep in on Saturday morning. Then I took John to the afternoon session of the conference. A person took us on a tour of the Conference Center broadcasting area. He was amazed and commented that the Church had newer equipment than he had in NRK. I also arranged for us to sit in the control room during the afternoon session. He and I both enjoyed the experience. He commented that it was much like NRK's control room, but no swearing.

On Sunday morning we sat down on the second row of the Conference Center with the audience. Craig invited me to bring John and Sigrun on the stand after the broadcast for him to introduce them to the Choir. After talking about John, Craig asked the Choir members how many of them had Norwegian heritage and then Scandinavian heritage. It seemed like nearly every hand went up. John couldn't stop talking about that. After the broadcast I drove John and Sigrun to the airport to catch their flight back to Norway.

There was a side story to insert with John Bernander's visit. At the Friday evening dinner with the Tabernacle Choir leaders, we not only discussed having "Music and the Spoken Word" on Norwegian television, but also the possibilities for the Tabernacle Choir when they would be in Oslo as part of the Choir's Northern Europe concert tour be planned for 2005.

There was a meeting with President Hinckley that caused President Hinckley to consider taking the Tabernacle Choir on and Northern Europe concert tour for 2005. The first Danish VIP I brought to BYU on the Leo Jacobsen lecture series was Bertel Haarder, the Danish Minister of Education and Church Affairs. His visit was in September 1992. A special highlight for Bertel was going to the "music and the Spoken Word. He said when he was a student in the United States in 1966, he came through SLC. He and his friends went to the broadcast and it had instantly made him a fan of the Tabernacle Choir. In June 2000, Bertel, his wife and his daughter returned to Utah for a visit. Their arrival

was the same evening at the “An Evening of Celebration” in honor of President Hinckley's 90th birthday. I arranged with the Governor's Executive Security officers to pick the Haarders up at the airport and drive us to the Conference Center. We arrived just in time for the celebration.

I had arranged a meeting for Bertel with the First Presidency for Tuesday morning. Because of Bertel's enthusiasm for the Tabernacle Choir, I asked Bertel if he would do a favor for me. I asked if he would ask President Hinckley when he might take the Choir back for a Nordic countries concert tour. Bertel said he would be happy to do that. However, Bertel and President Hinckley became so engaged in their conversation, I could see he had forgotten about my request. Not wanting to let the opportunity pass, I inserted the question and said, “President Hinckley, Minister Haarder, being a fan of the Tabernacle Choir has a question for you. Since the last time the Choir went to the Nordic countries was in the 1980s, do you have any consideration about taking them again?”

President Hinckley knew who was really asking the question. He looked directly at me semi-glaring and started lecturing me. He said: “You know how many people would like the Choir to come to their country; you know the size of the Choir; you know how costly it is to take the Choir on tour...” I was feeling pretty embarrassed about asking and thought, “You can stop. I got your message!” As he concluded, President Hinckley put his head down and appeared to go into a brief trance. After about a minute in silence, President Hinckley looked up and softly said: “We need to reconsider that decision. We will consider that.”

About three months later, I was visiting with my cousin, Jay Christensen. He said he was visiting with Mac (Christensen), his cousin, that morning and mentioned me. Mac said he thought I had more influence in the Church, except for President Hinckley. Jay said Mac didn't say why Mac had said that. I told him, I did. President Hinckley had decided to endorse the Choir going to the Nordic countries on a concert tour. Six months before Bertel's meeting with President Hinckley, he had turned down a request by the President of Iceland to come for a special performance.

The next day I telephoned Ian McKay, the representative of Bonneville Broadcasting, who worked with the Choir. Ian privately confirmed President Hinckley had authorized the planning of the tour. However, with the Twin Towers bombing, President Hinckley canceled the tour.

### **Norwegian Ambassador Knut Vollebæk and his meeting in Chicago**

In the summer of 2004, President Cecil Samuelson and I were invited by the Norwegian Ambassador, Knut Vollebæk, to attend the US - Norway Forum that would be held in Chicago on October 14 and 15. President Samuelson couldn't go, and I had a conflict in my schedule, so I decided to also decline the invitation. About a month before the Forum, Ambassador Vollebæk telephoned me on another matter. At the conclusion of our conversation I told him I would not be able to attend the US - Norway Forum in Chicago. Ambassador Vollebæk expressed his disappointment and encouraged me to

reconsider. He said the Friday morning session of the Forum was going to be about the Norway's centennial celebration in 2005 of being an independent country. After hanging up the phone, I felt impressed that I should attend the US - Norway Forum. I asked Ed Blaser to assume my obligation of hosting the CES Tour Committee Meetings at BYU. I then called Ambassador Vollebæk and told him I had changed my mind, and I would come to the Chicago Forum.

On Friday morning of the Forum, October 15, Jan Erik Raanes and Bendik Rugaas made presentations about the forthcoming Norway centennial celebrations in Norway and in the United States. Jan Erik Raanes had responsibility for coordinating the Norway events and Bendik Rugaas had responsibility for coordinating the United States events. As I listened to their presentations, I thought this might be a good opportunity for recommending that Tabernacle Choir dedicate a Sunday morning broadcast to Norway's centennial and in having Sissel Kyrkjebø as the guest artist.

After their presentations the Forum members went to lunch, and it left Jan Erik and Bendik Rugaas in the room alone. I approached them and introduced myself. I told them I appreciated their presentations, and everything sounded very exciting. I then said, I think you have one major void. They asked what it was. I proceeded to say that there were a lot of Norwegian immigrates who came to Utah, but they didn't have any celebration plans in Utah.

They asked if I had any suggestions. I said that maybe we could approach the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and ask if they would be willing to dedicate a Sunday morning "Music and the Spoken Word" to dedicate to the Norwegian celebration. They were excited about the consideration but asked if I thought the Choir would do it. I told them I would be happy to approach the Choir leaders. I then added, if the Choir did make a special dedicated broadcast, they would want a Norwegian guest artist. I asked if they had a suggestion. They both replied in unison and excitement, "It would have to be Sissel Kyrkjebø." I said I was familiar with Sissel, but I asked if the Choir could get her since she was so busy and probably expensive. Bendik said he and Ambassador Vollebæk knew Sissel and her manager, Arne Svare, and they would be happy to approach them about Sissel singing with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Bendik then said, "Would you like me to approach them and ask?" I replied, "Yes." I then added, "You realize that I am not connected to the Choir and I would simply be a member of the Church making a proposal." They said they understood.

I was very excited about their endorsement and their willingness to help get Sissel to Utah. I flew back to Utah that evening. It was also very timely in that on Sunday, October 17th, I left to advance the BYU Wind Symphony's concert tour in Scandinavia for May 2005. My first stop was in Frankfurt, Germany. On Monday, October 18th, after concluding the BYU Wind Symphony tour agenda with Elder L. Tom Perry and Elder Bruce C. Hafen, I told them of the Friday event at the US - Norway Forum and my suggestion about having the Church and the Tabernacle Choir dedicate a Sunday morning broadcast to Norway's Centennial Celebration. I asked Elder Perry and Elder Hafen what they thought about the idea. Elder Perry's immediately responded, "I know the Choir would be more interested if they knew the program would be broadcasted on

Norwegian television.” I told them I was having dinner with John Bernander, Director of Norwegian Broadcasting, on Thursday night in Oslo and I would ask him.

From Germany I went to Copenhagen to do the advance; then on to Stockholm; and then on to Oslo. On Thursday evening, John Bernander and I had dinner together. During the evening, I told John of the previous Friday’s exchange at the U.S.-Norway Forum in Chicago, and I explored the possibility with him of NRK broadcasting “Music and the Spoken Word” in Norway if the Mormon Tabernacle Choir dedicated a program to Norway’s centennial and Sissel as the guest artist. John replied, “Pete, I can’t give you a definite commitment. I would need to take that to my programming staff, but I don’t see any reason why NRK wouldn’t be interested.” I replied, “Can I quote you?” He said I could. We concluded that I had John’s support and that I would proceed with the recommendation.

On Sunday, October 23rd, Elder Perry went to Norway for a Stake Conference and to release Eivind Sterri as Stake President. Tom-Atle Herland was sustained as the new Stake President. When it was time for Elder Perry to speak, he referred to our long friendship and he invited me to bear my testimony about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. After Stake Conference, I gave Elder Perry a report of my conversation with John Bernander. Elder Perry recommended that I proceed in contacting Mac Christensen, Choir President, and Craig Jessop, Choir Director, with the proposal. I had hoped Elder Perry would take the proposal and submit it to Mac and Craig. I was afraid I had lost my chances by approaching them. (I had Harald Stanghelle, Political Editor for Aftenposten with me.)

On Monday, October 24th, I returned to Utah. The first thing I did Tuesday morning, October 25, was write to Mac Christensen and Craig Jessop rehearsing what had happened and making the recommendation. Part of my motivation in doing it so quickly was that I was hosting Thor Bjarne Bore from Norway that week. We will attend “Music and the Spoken Word” broadcast on Sunday, October 30. In my letter I requested you to bring Thor Bjarne Bore to meet with them at the conclusion of the broadcast. I told them that Thor Bjarne was President of the Norwegian Lutheran Church Council and vice chairman of the Board for Norwegian National Broadcasting (NRK). I felt that having the Vice Chair of the NRK Board would give credibility to the interest of NRK to broadcasting the program.

On Sunday, as planned, Thor Bjerne and I met with Mac and Craig. (I might insert that Anthony Perkins, the movie star, and his wife were at the broadcast. We sat next to Anthony Perkins and I had the opportunity of visiting with him for about fifteen minutes before the broadcast started.) As we approached the stand, Craig saw me and shouted, “I received your letter. Let’s do it!” I was pleased Craig responded he had received my letter of recommendation; he and Mac thought it was a good idea; and they were willing to dedicate a broadcast sometime between February and June, yet to be determined. I couldn’t believe a decision was made so quickly and they committed to dedicate a broadcast. (I have never seen Church bureaucracy move this fast. It had to be the Lord's hand!)

Three weeks later (November 12-14, 2004), the Norwegian Ambassador, Knut Vollebæk, and his wife, came to Utah at my invitation to give a lecture at Brigham Young University. Originally, they planned to attend the broadcast on Sunday, but due to other commitments which required them to be in New York, we changed the time with the Choir to Thursday evening when the Choir was in a recording session. In the meantime, Bendik Rugaas visited with Arne Svare, Sissel's manager. Bendik reported that Sissel and Arne would be interested in having Sissel sing with the Choir. Therefore, when Ambassador Vollebæk came to Utah, I said to Ambassador Vollebæk that he would need to push Sissel in his recommendation to have Sissel sing with the Choir. I said Mac and Craig had not heard Sissel sing, and they were not familiar with her. But part of my reason for me asking Ambassador Vollebæk to sell Sissel was I wanted the Embassy to help pay for Sissel to come or to get her to waive her performance fee.

That evening we met with Scott Barrick, General Manager of the Choir, and Ed Jones, Producer of "Music and the Spoken Word" program, along with Mac Christensen, Craig Jessop, and Stan Parrish. Ambassador Vollebæk's recommendation of Sissel singing with the Choir was embraced by all. However, there was a question about the cost for bringing her to sing with the Choir. The Choir would not pay for her performance nor her travel costs. I volunteered to cover Sissel's and her music director's transportation and local costs. I then explained to Ambassador Vollebæk that the Choir does not pay for their guest artists and, therefore, would the Embassy pay for her fee out of its centennial celebration account or could he get Sissel to waive her fee. Ambassador Vollebæk said that since we were paying all other costs, he felt arrangements could be worked out for her to waive her fee.

The next step was for Scott Barrick to formally contact Arne Svare and officially extend the invitation. There was a two-month time delay before Scott contacted Arne, because of the Christmas concerts scheduled and the recording schedules the Choir had. Finally, in January, Scott sent the invitation and suggested May 1 as the broadcast date. Arne Svare confirmed the date fit Sissel's schedule. I then stepped in the mix by working with Arne in making the travel arrangements and working out Sissel's itinerary in Utah. It was then March before we got into much communication. I decided to have Sissel stay at the Grand America Hotel. I wanted the very best impression made. Sissel needed to come on Wednesday so that she could rehearse with the Choir on Thursday evening.

I also asked Arne if Sissel would be willing to give a concert while she was in Utah. He replied, "I think it would be a shame for her to come that far and not give a concert." We then started negotiating what would need to be included. Initially we talked about the possibility of simply a recital with an accompanist playing her most popular songs and her singing. However, through the development of our discussion, we decided to do a full-blown concert at BYU. It would require an 18-piece orchestra, a 25-piece local women's vocal back up group, and a four-piece band. I first checked with BYU to see if we could get the concert at BYU and use the de Jong Concert Hall. They said I could.

I was pleased that if it were a BYU sponsored concert, the overhead cost for using the facilities, ushers, etc. was only 6% of the gate receipts. That meant keeping the price reasonable so that we could have a full house but anticipated \$10,000 profit on tickets

sales it still left me \$21,000 short from what I anticipated the cost to be. Therefore, I approached several donors asking if they would be willing to give \$3,000 each. Six of the donors immediately committed to giving me \$18,000 and through the collective efforts of several others, I was able to collect the remaining amount which nearly took me to \$24,000.

My big challenge was putting together the concert. Originally, we talked about just having Sissel and a piano accompanist, but it ended up expanding to an orchestra, band, and back up choir. By good fortune Merrill Jenson joined me with this project. Merrill was one of my father's missionaries and his mother was both Norwegian and an opera singer. Little did Merrill and I understand at the offset what we were getting into. But, Merrill's musical skills, his background and knowledge of Sissel's music, his commitment to the project, and his availability being unemployed at the time, allowed him to spend his full time pulling together, arranging, and directing the concert and Sissel's performance with the Tabernacle Choir. The concert wouldn't have happened without Merrill. He was God sent!

The first challenge was getting an orchestra. Merrill Jenson and I met with Dale Monson, chair of the BYU Music Department, and Paul Duerden, manager of the de Jong Concert Hall. We concluded we should use local professional musicians. It would only cost approximately \$6,000 for an 18-piece orchestra. Merrill had a person in the community who played first violin in the Temple Square Orchestra who puts together special requests, and she did so for us. Next, we needed to find a 25-piece vocal backup group. The timing of Sissel's concert came just one week into summer term. However, in visiting with Dale Monson (BYU Music Department Chair), he suggested that the director of the BYU Women's Choir was very good, and she might be able to draw together the number of female students in the area or attending spring/summer who could sign in the choir. In discussing costs, Dale suggested we offer \$2,000 to the Women's Choir for their participation. I said if they would be happy with \$2,000 let's make it \$3,000 – so we gave \$3,000 to them. Then Merrill arranged for the 4-piece band. The de Jong Concert Hall was very professional in their sound requirements and staging. It was a delight to work with everyone. But again, I can't say enough for Merrill Jenson who really made the musical support portion of it work.

### **Sissel's first trip to Utah in 2005**

Finally, the day arrived when Sissel arrived. I arranged to pick her up planeside. It was fun to personally meet Sissel and welcome her to Utah. Her musical director, Kjetil Bjerkestrand arrived with her. They were exhausted and we were able to drive them immediately to the hotel. They had until 11:30 a.m. the following morning to sleep in and catch up from jetlag. At 12:00 noon, we had luncheon with the Tabernacle Choir leadership. It was a very nice luncheon, and everyone was very congenial to Sissel. She, too, was a delight. We then had a Norwegian sister, Sister Hannah Pedersen from Moss, take her on a tour of Temple Square. When we went to the Conference Center the organist, Linda Margetts, demonstrated the organ and let Kjetil play the organ. We then went back to the Joseph Smith Memorial Building on the top floor Wasatch room where Merrill Jenson took time to review the musical scores with Sissel and Kjetil.

That evening was the Choir rehearsal. We had a BYU police officer, Chris Autry, who was full-time with Sissel. We drove down into the Conference Center. As we came out onto the stage, Sissel looked around at the Conference Center. It was overwhelming. Sissel looked at the Choir and she grabbed my arm saying, "Pete, this gives me butterflies!" It was fun to see her response. She greeted people and then dove into the rehearsal. It was a very productive rehearsal, but it only went on for about 45 minutes. Following the rehearsal, we took Sissel back to Grand America Hotel where she could relax.

On Friday, we had luncheon with donors. I felt it was my only opportunity to give a personal interchange for the donors and friends who had been so supportive. We had a wonderful luncheon. We were on the top floor of the Joseph Smith Memorial Building. We had a reception line, and each person had their picture taken with Sissel. Following the luncheon, we had the International Children's Choir sing some numbers; I then made some presentations to the donors; and we invited Sissel to speak. Sissel pleased us all by what she said and then she had us join in singing a Norwegian folk song. The experience couldn't have gone better.

Friday afternoon, we drove to BYU. We spent approximately three hours going through the rehearsal for her concert at BYU. I was interested however that Sissel did not sing, but she simply listened to the orchestra, choir and band to get her feel with them and how they played. She was very encouraging, supportive, and positive in what she said, but she gently corrected them and shaped them to what she wanted. By 8:00 p.m. we were on our way back to Salt Lake City.

Saturday was open. Sissel did some shopping for new clothes for the Sunday broadcast and then we drove back to BYU. We were there by 4:00 p.m. Again, Sissel picked up with the orchestra, band, and choir, deciding what numbers she would sing and the order she would sing them. We then broke for lunch. She was very careful in what she ate. There was one story which came out in an interview with TV2. She asked if she could have some coffee. Of course, we didn't have any and we didn't know what to do. Finally, we sent Chris Autry to buy a cup of coffee for her. As she told the story in an interview the next day, Chris came back with an extra-large container of coffee. She was a bit taken back by the size and then she said those present apologized saying none of them really knew how to make coffee. She found it a little humorous and unbelievable.

Later that evening was the concert at BYU. It was a full house. I welcomed the crowd and said the opening prayer. The show was then Sissel's. What a marvelous concert she gave. I think she was surprised both that it was a full house and how many people knew her, her music, and had a Norwegian background. It was an evening I will never forget; and neither will the others who were there! Sissel gave about four encore pieces. Each time she gone through with one the audience in standing ovation applauded for another. As she said, she finally ran out of numbers.

The next morning, we went at about 7:30 p.m. to the Conference Center. The Choir had a person, who had been an assistant to Celine Dion, meet Sissel and assist her. They

also made special arrangements for her to use the First Presidency's and Quorum of the Twelve's room where she relaxed and warmed up. At 8:30 a.m. they went through the "dry run" of the broadcast timing it. At that time, they put Sissel up in the loft by the Choir but later decided for the broadcast to bring Sissel down on the front stage by the orchestra. The whole experience was beyond comprehension for me. I sat there watching the program continually saying to myself "I really can't believe this is happening."

Sissel Kyrkjebø  
Performance with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir  
May 1, 2005

The formal Choir program was:

Conductors; Craig Jessop and Mack Wilberg  
Guests: Sissel Kyrkjebø, soprano; Merrill Jenson, guest conductor  
Organist: Linda Margetts  
May 1, 2005  
3,949<sup>th</sup> broadcast

"Cry Out and Shout"  
music by Knut Nystedt  
words from Isaiah 12  
adapted by Frank Pooler

"Discovery"  
music by Edvard Grieg  
word by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

"Vitae lux"  
music by Frode Alnæ  
arranged by K. Bjerkestrand

"Herre Gud, ditt dyre navn og ære"  
Norwegian folk song  
arranged by K. Bjerkestrand

"Like an Angel Passing through My Room"  
by B. Andersson and B. Ulvæus  
arranged by K. Bjerkestrand

"Ja, vi elsker dette landet"  
(Norwegian national anthem)  
music by Rikard Nordraak  
words by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

translated by Michael McOmber  
arranged by Merrill Jenson

There were about 6,000 people in attendance. The following week Mac Christensen, Choir President, announced to the Choir that they had more inquires and compliments about their program and Sissel than any time since Walter Cronkite.

Following the broadcast, Craig Jessop extended an invitation to Sissel to come back to Utah and participate with the Tabernacle Choir in their December 2006 Christmas concert. Sissel replied very positively. I was thrilled. The program and the experience exceeded all expectations, and it fulfilled a long-desired dream to have Sissel sing with the Choir. There are many things that lead up to this event, but I believe the door was largely opened by the Lord and the impact of the program will be long remembered in Utah and hopefully in Norway. These are just a few thoughts that capture a brief history of how this event came together.

At Andrew's wedding in March, I had extended an invitation for my daughters to come and be part of the Sissel weekend. To my surprise and pleasure, they all came. That added even more to the experience for Colleen and me to have our children with us. Following the Sunday morning broadcast, we returned to Grand America hotel and where all my family and Merrill Jensen and his wife had brunch with Sissel and her people. That was fun to have our children get to have some personal time with Sissel. Following lunch, we took Sissel and her people to the airport. They returned to Norway.

In March, prior to Sissel's visit to Utah, I attended the BYU School of Management dinner in Washington, D.C., I arranged a luncheon with Bendik Rugaas. Bendik brought with him Gerhard Helskog, Norway TV2's News Bureau Chief for the United States. Bendik explained that he had been trying to persuade Gerhard to come to Utah for Sissel's concert, for its coverage, and to do some stories on the Mormons. We discussed those possibilities which lead to Gerhard coming. A time was arranged for Gerhard to interview Sissel after the concert at BYU Saturday evening. However, because Sissel gave so many encores, Arne Svare said he did not want her doing any talking so that she could save her voice for the next day.

Initially I was disappointed and a bit embarrassed. However, what resulted I later felt was the Lord's hand influencing the delay and better time for the interview. The interview was rescheduled for Sunday at 1:00 p.m. after the Tabernacle Choir Broadcast. Sissel was extremely touched by the Tabernacle Choir's singing "God Be with You "Till We Meet Again" and by the whole experience that it was reflected in her interview that was broadcast on Norwegian television that evening. She told how pleased she was to be invited to sing with the Choir; how impressed she was with the Choir; and it was a fulfillment of dreams. Gerhard later gave me a copy of the interview. I was very pleased that it had been broadcasted in Norway. My Norwegian friends told me how positive it was accepted and the good impression that it made.

Three weeks later, Colleen and I had the opportunity of being in Oslo, Norway, with the BYU Wind Symphony. Elder L. Tom Perry came to Oslo for a May 19 event. First, we visited Valgerd Svarstad Haugland, Minister of Culture and Church Affairs. At the end of the visit, I presented four copies of the January Governor's Declaration in tribute to Norway's centennial and four DVDs of the Tabernacle Choir broadcast with Sissel. I said, "Of these four copies, one was for her, one was for the Prime Minister, one was for the Crown Prince, and one was for His Majesty the King." A big smile came on her face and her eyes seemed to twinkle as she said enthusiastically, "I can do that. I will see that they receive these." Later that afternoon, we had a special "Friends of BYU" dinner in the Hotel Continental. It was a most delightful time and those who attended included:

Lucy and Carsten Smith, former Chief Justice of the Norwegian Supreme Court;  
and Lucy Smith was the former Rector (president) of Oslo University  
Kari and Georg Fr. Rieber-Mohn, Norwegian Supreme Court Justice and former  
Attorney General of Norway

Geir and Valgerd Svarstad Haugland, Minister of Culture and Church Affairs  
Minister and Mrs. Dagfinn Høybråten, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs

Karin and Thorvald Stoltenberg, former Norwegian Ambassador to Denmark,  
former Foreign Minister and former U.N. Peace Negotiator to Bosnia

Ingrid Schelerud and Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister, and former Member of  
Parliament

Liv and Einar Steensnæs, Minister of Petroleum and Energy

Kari and Inge Lønning, Professor of Theology, editor of the Norwegian State  
Lutheran Theological Journal, and former rector of Oslo University

Kirsten and Guttorm Fløistad, famous author and Professor of Philosophy

Viebecke and Tom Vraalsen, former Norwegian Ambassador to the United States

Beate and Kjeld Vibe, former Norwegian Ambassador to the United States

Gudmund Hernes, Minister of Health and former Minister of Education,  
Research and Church Affairs

Hilde and Francis Sejersted, Professor of History and Chair of the Nobel Peace  
Prize Committee

Grethe and Peter Lødrup, Professor of Law, former dean of the Law School, and  
acting Supreme Court Justice

Else Cathrine and Gerhard Heiberg, Owner of consulting firm, chairman of the  
board of the Bank of Norway, member of the International Olympic  
Committee, and former President and CEO of the 1994 Lillehammer  
Winter Olympics

Else and Johan Fr. Heyerdahl, former Executive Director of the Norwegian  
Federation

Kari Fougner and Gunnar Gran, Executive Director of the Norwegian Federation

Mr. and Mrs. Kjetil Flatin, the Norwegian Federation

Mr. and Mrs. Thor Bjarne Bore, Former editor in chief/chief executive officer of  
Stavanger Aftenblad, President of The Church of Norway

Randi and Dag Mork Ulnes, member of the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and  
former Norwegian Consul General in San Francisco

Tone and Hans Ole Urstad, former Norwegian Consul General in San Francisco

Else Berit Eikeland and Pål Fossum, former Norwegian Vice Consul

Jannicke Jaeger, Foreign Ministry "Speech Writer" for the Prime Minister and  
Foreign Minister and former Norwegian Vice Consul  
Anne Lieungh and Harald Stanghelle, Political Editor of *Aftenposten*  
Sigrun and John Bernander, Director of Norwegian National Broadcasting  
Anne Felberg and Geir Henning Braaten, International Concert Pianist

At the conclusion of the dinner, Elder Perry and I presented a DVD copy of the May 1st Music and the Spoken Word broadcast with Sissel to each guest. Then Inge Lønning stood and paid the most beautiful complement to me for my work with Norway. It will be something I will always treasure.

What is now fun is that the invitation given by Craig Jessop to Sissel following the May 1st broadcast is now being fulfilled with Sissel being the guest artist for this year's Tabernacle Choir Christmas Concert. However, this time it is the Choir's gig, and I will simply sit in the audience as a listener. While I won't have anything to do with her visit, I do have the satisfaction of having played a part in bringing this to pass through her first visit. For that I am grateful.