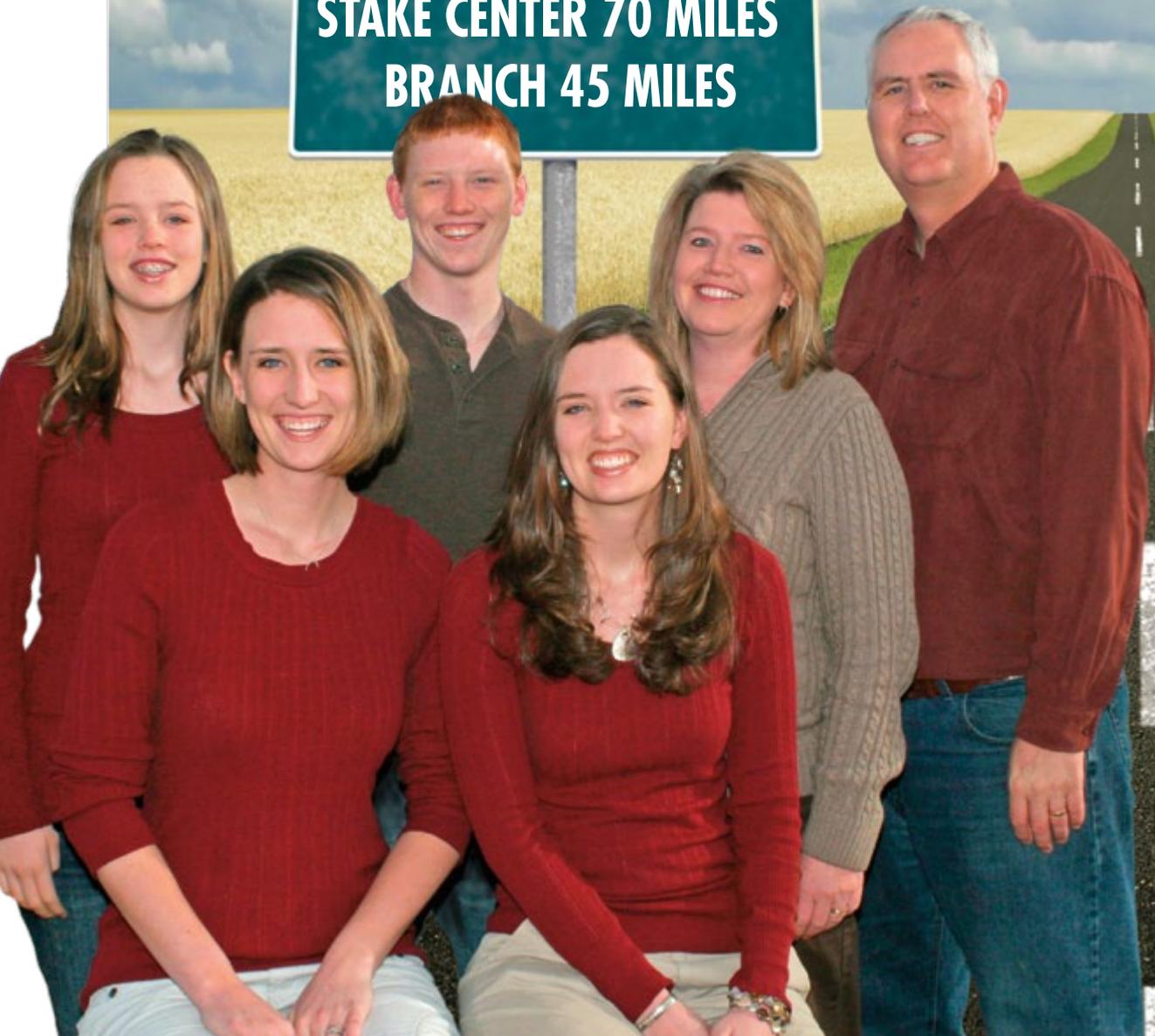


Decisions

STAKE CENTER 70 MILES
BRANCH 45 MILES



That Make a

Difference

By Melissa Merrill
Church Magazines

Seventy miles to the stake center. Forty-five miles to the branch meetinghouse. For this Kansas family, living far away brought them closer to God—and each other.



When Tommy and Mickie Crowther and their two-year-old daughter moved to Centralia, Kansas, USA, in 1988, they were surprised to learn that the nearest branch of the Church, with some 25 members, was 45 miles (72 km) away.

Both Tommy and Mickie had grown up in the western United States in areas where there were large Latter-day Saint populations, and they hoped to return there and live near their extended family. But they quickly began to feel that their branch in Kansas was exactly where their family was supposed to be, so they stayed.

The Crowthers have now lived in Centralia nearly 25 years and have raised their four children—Heidi, Katie, Jake, and Jenny—in the small, rural community. And while living in an area somewhat isolated from other Church members has been challenging, the Crowthers say it has also been an amazing opportunity.

The branch that the Crowther family belongs to

DOCTRINAL CONNECTIONS

How are the following doctrines addressed in the article?

- Family relationships can last for eternity.
- Divine bonds between family members are forged as they do positive things together.
- A Christ-centered home is a place of refuge, healing, defense against sin, and love.

The Crowther family puts priority on attending activities that are not only fun but spiritually enriching as well, such as a youth conference trek the children participated in (right).



currently has about 30 people attending. That number has ranged from 20 to 70 over the years and continues to change. Distance and branch size have created challenges and required the family to make sacrifices, as such circumstances have for many Latter-day Saints. But no matter how small the unit or how remote the location, Tommy and Mickie believe that several key decisions have been essential in raising their family to be strong in the gospel.

Decide to Participate

For the first few years of living in Kansas, the Crowthers could make the trip to the meetinghouse only once a week, for their Sunday meetings. “We were paying off

school loans, and we didn’t have the money to make the trip more often than that, such as for weeknight Relief Society meetings,” Mickie explains. “But as time went on, as our children got older and our finances improved, we decided to have them at every activity that we could.”

“Making the effort to be there has made a huge difference,” Tommy says. “One of the major blessings of living in this area has been our stake, which has always been fantastic about supporting the youth. Our children have developed friendships with other teens in the stake, and the stake leaders have loved and supported them.”

The stake has also provided meaningful, spiritual activities that bless the lives of the youth.

“We wouldn’t drive as far as we do just for a fun activity,” Mickie says. “We can find fun activities closer to home. But we go to Church activities because the stake provides things that feed our children spiritually, build them, and help them be stronger. That means a lot.”

Stake leadership has also been considerate in ways that facilitate participation, Tommy says. “Stake leaders have been sensitive to our situation and have done things like scheduling a seminary meeting just before a stake dance so that those of us traveling long distances don’t have to make extra trips,” he continues. “But none of those things would have happened if we hadn’t decided to participate and make participation a possibility for our children.”



Teach Your Children in the Home

The Crowthers are grateful to be part of a branch that is “small but strong,” as Tommy describes it, but he and Mickie admit that they have sometimes worried about how their children may face the influences of the world when they don’t have a large youth group in their branch to lean on.

“I remember as a young mother being concerned about my children being taught the gospel when our branch was so small and programs were sometimes limited,” she says. “Then I realized that it was *our*—my and Tommy’s—responsibility to make sure that our family learned the gospel. It wasn’t Church leaders’ responsibility—it was ours. What our children learned at church could support what we were teaching in the home; we made sure we were reading the Book of Mormon, holding family home evening, and teaching the gospel consistently.”

Follow the Guidelines of the Church

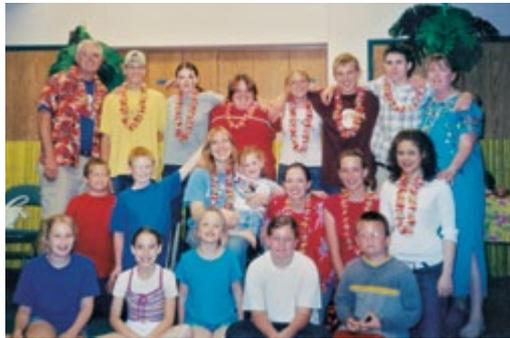
Mickie takes comfort in reading the New Testament and seeing how Paul wrote to different branches of the Church “to make sure everyone was still on track,” as she says.

“Even though we’re in a small branch, we want to have the true gospel for our children here. To do that, it’s very important for us to follow the guidelines of the Church as found in the Church handbook. The handbook is for us today what those epistles were for members in the time of the New Testament.”

Seminary is one area where following official Church guidelines has been important for the Crowthers. “We have had seminary in our home,” explains Mickie, who was called and set apart as a seminary teacher. “Every morning, it’s me and one of our children.



Strong Church programs like Young Women camp (above) and Mutual activities (below) have strengthened the Crowther family, but Tommy and Mickie realize that the primary responsibility for teaching their children lies in the home.



Sometimes it’s a struggle. Sometimes the child doesn’t like mornings. But I take the time and effort to teach as I would teach at church, with preparation and visual aids and scripture mastery. I’ve tried to give them the full experience.”

In following the policies of the Church, the Crowther family has been blessed by its programs. “The projects and programs our children have participated in have given them opportunities to stand out in positive ways in our community, where we’re very much a curiosity as members of the Church,” Mickie adds.



IT BEGINS AT HOME

“The responsibility of building leadership in the Church belongs to the father and the mother. As youth grow and mature through their teenage years and move toward adulthood, the Church picks up an important role in this process of giving youth an opportunity to lead, but it begins in the home.”

Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, in “Tending the Flock: Teaching Leadership Skills to Youth,” *Ensign*, June 2008, 16.

Sunday meetings are held many miles away from the Crowthers' home, but the sacrifices the family makes to attend their meetings with their branch (pictured here in 2005) bring them together as a family and strengthen their faith in Jesus Christ.



Use Your Time Well

“Our children knew that anytime we were going to the stake center, it would be 70 miles each way,” says Tommy. “Going to a Church meeting could take the whole day or at least the whole afternoon. That was a challenge at first, but then we decided to use that travel time for good. I would drive, and Mickie would read. Our children came to love that and even look forward to that family time, that teaching time.”

“I used to worry that we were participating in Church things at the cost of family things,” Mickie remembers. “But now we’ve realized that the Church things have *become* the family things. With careful planning, our times together coming and going from Church meetings and activities have been some of our best family experiences.”

Maintain Standards

For a long time, the Crowthers were the only members of the Church in their county. “None of our children have ever had another member attending their school with them,” says Mickie. “They’ve had to stand on their own. But because of the decisions they’ve made to maintain their standards, others have looked to them to maintain those standards. If

they let down their guard, others will question them.”

One difficult decision for the Crowther children involved participation in athletic events. “One of our daughters is a good volleyball player and wanted to play club volleyball, which is held on Sunday afternoons,” Tommy explains. “We talked about the decision and the consequences with her and even went to tryouts. We told her we would support her in her decision. It was probably one of the hardest decisions she had made at that point in her life, so when she told us that she had decided not to participate, that meant a lot. I knew how much she wanted it. I also knew why she didn’t do it, and that told me that her priorities were right.

“When you have that kind of experience or walk by your child’s room at night and see them reading their scriptures—not because you’re making them but because they’re doing it on their own—that helps you as a parent know that the things you’re doing are working.”

Build Family Unity

Ultimately, no matter how supportive Church leaders are or how meaningful activities may be, for the Crowthers, the efforts—and the payoff—are most significant at home.

Efforts in the home involve not only consistency but also creativity, Mickie says. “We play a lot of games with our family,” she explains. “When there’s going to be a big party that our teens know they shouldn’t go to, we plan something special. By doing something fun at home, we help them feel like they’re not missing out.”



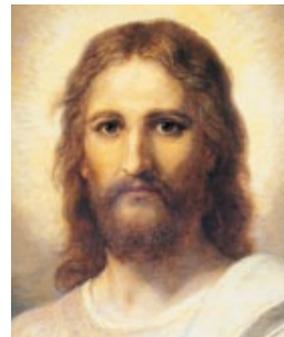
The fun activities are complemented by shared spiritual experiences, Tommy says. “When our oldest daughters were attending Brigham Young University, we went to visit them. Our youngest was then 12, so we went to the Provo Utah Temple to do baptisms. That was a special experience we shared,” he recalls.

Such activities build family unity, and as a result, Tommy and Mickie have watched their children become each others’ best support.

Both Tommy and Mickie believe that all of these efforts and important decisions

are centered on the family. “Being together forever with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ is our biggest goal. That’s why we do everything we can to have the gospel in our home and in our lives,” Tommy says.

“Yes, there are sacrifices involved in living the gospel and in Church participation when you live in a remote area, as we do,” Mickie says. “But we’d do anything we can to make it possible for us to be together forever. When it comes down to it, this is the only thing that really matters.” ■



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HOW SENIOR MISSIONARIES HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE

“Senior missionaries have made a huge difference in the lives of our branch members and especially our family,” Mickie Crowther says. Often the elders have served in the branch presidency and the sisters have served in an auxiliary presidency. But wherever they have served in the branch, Mickie says, “they have been so much help.”

Several couples have served in the community in the last 20 years, and their influence has been lasting. “When you’ve been here so long and the group is so small, it’s really nice to have someone fresh come in with new enthusiasm,” Mickie



says. She recalls one sister in particular who made everything—no matter what it was—a lot of fun. This sister encouraged branch members to socialize more and know one another better.

“She started a ward choir and even brought cinnamon rolls when we rehearsed,” Mickie recalls. “Before that, we didn’t have a choir. And even though we weren’t very good, those of us who

went had a great experience. In fact, the choir grew so big that when we sang on Sunday, we didn’t have anyone to sing to—all of us were in the choir!

“We all felt we would do anything for this sister because of what she did for us.”

These couples, Mickie says, have lifted many burdens for individuals, families, and their small branch.

They’ve been grandparents to the children and youth. They’ve been good friends to the adults and have offered support and encouragement. They’ve been able to reach less-active members in ways no one else could. And after their service is complete, they remain lifelong friends with the members from their mission.

“They are wonderful,” says Mickie. “We know that they come at great sacrifice, both family-wise and emotionally. We know that they come at personal expense. I can’t say enough how much we would like to have senior missionaries in our area all of the time. They’ll never know what a difference they have made in our lives.”