

A photograph of Dr. David R. Parker, an African American man, standing on a stage. He is wearing a white dress shirt, a dark tie, and a bright red vest. His hands are raised in a gesture of blessing or prayer, with palms facing forward. He has a serene expression on his face. The background is a large, out-of-focus crowd of people, suggesting a significant public event. The lighting is warm, highlighting the man and the red vest.

At the Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah, Dr. David R. Parker, associate director of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Center for Community of Caring, signs “Let There Be Peace on Earth” while the audience sings. Held in February 2012, this event was under the direction of the Salt Lake Interfaith Roundtable.

BECOMING BETTER SAINTS THROUGH

Interfaith Involvement

*When we serve alongside those of other faiths,
we not only build our communities and improve our
relationships but we also become better disciples ourselves.*

By Betsy VanDenBerghe

Church leaders frequently call on members to participate with the honest in heart—regardless of religious affiliation—in service and in causes on moral issues. And Church leaders often set the example. Recently, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, along with his wife, Harriet, received a Humanitarian of the Year award from Catholic Community Services; he noted the irony of “two Germans, former Lutherans, now committed Mormons being honored by Catholics in the United States of America.”¹

Members around the world have responded commendably to the call to serve shoulder to shoulder with members of other organizations. I have been touched by accounts of LDS wards growing community gardens, holding interfaith conferences on moral values, and doing community cleanups with other congregations.

In serving with those of other faiths, I’ve found the encouragement from Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to be true: Respectful and sincere interfaith service not only builds our communities but also enables us to collectively and individually grow in our love of God and His children.²

Bettering the World

A few years ago, a Presbyterian minister moved into my community wanting to serve all of her neighbors, not just her church congregation. As she reached out in our predominantly LDS neighborhood with friendliness, offers to help, and invitations to neighborhood parties, ward members began participating in her congregation’s service projects; together, she and neighbors of various faiths held



Holladay Matters (in Holladay, Utah, USA) was formed to welcome people of all faiths, or no religious affiliation, into neighborhood projects and activities. Pictured are the founding members, women of various denominations.

a fundraiser that significantly helped an LDS family with dire medical expenses.

Apostle Orson F. Whitney (1855–1931) stated, “God is using more than one people for the accomplishment of his great and marvelous work. . . . It is too vast, too arduous, for any one people.”³ Great things can be accomplished when good people band together. Our neighborhood minister’s efforts led to the formation of a community interfaith committee that, along with our stake Relief Society, put on a women’s conference supplying hygiene kits and books to refugee agencies. These interfaith connections then enabled stake members to help a congregation feed a large refugee gathering and to step in when another church needed additional volunteers at a homeless shelter.

“We have a responsibility . . . to work cooperatively with other churches and organizations,” President Thomas S. Monson has told members,⁴ and this outreach has blessed the world beyond humanitarian service. In an address to Christian leaders in the United States, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles described a series of LDS–Evangelical Christian dialogues held at Brigham Young University.⁵ One outcome of these conferences occurred when a prominent theologian apologized for mischaracterizations of the Mormon faith by some in his community.⁶ Of such bridge building Elder Holland said, “I cannot help but believe this to be part of a divine orchestration of events in these troubled times.”⁷



In December 2011, children from the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in New Jersey, USA, perform a Christmas program with children from a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The benefit concert helped collect food for the local food pantry.

Bettering Our Relationships

As we serve with others, certain guidelines can help us make our interactions more meaningful and avoid giving offense. I once lived in a large city and volunteered for a local church’s tutoring program open to the public—only to discover that the person in charge found my membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints unacceptable. That experience convinced me to value anyone’s contribution regardless of his or her religious affiliation (or lack thereof). I gratefully follow up on anyone’s interest in learning about the Church, but I also know that we Latter-day Saints take Jesus’s charge seriously to love our neighbor, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and visit the imprisoned (see Matthew 25:34–36) without expecting the conversion of the recipient or those who serve with us. Sincere and respectful interfaith engagement never requires any group, including ours, to disavow its beliefs. Rather, it encourages participants to “contend against no church”



(D&C 18:20) and “clothe [themselves] with the bond of charity” (D&C 88:125).

Another helpful guideline came from a wise stake leader in our heavily LDS neighborhood. He advised members serving with other faiths not to “take over” by dominating in decisions or leadership but to work in councils and allow all to “have an equal privilege” (D&C 88:122). This leader, who had extensive experience engaging with other churches, also encouraged members to develop good relationships. He had discovered that some who had partnered with Latter-day Saints found them hardworking and pleasant but more interested in getting the work done than in developing friendships.

My experiences in community and educational causes have convinced me that the Spirit is strong when diverse people unite in a worthy mission. Brotherly love and pure motives propel service forward even more than the hard work involved.⁸

One LDS speaker at an interfaith academic conference observed that making connections with others helps those outside our faith better understand us.⁹ Another scholar, not of our faith, teaches a seminar on Mormonism at a prominent American university. She discovered that her students wanted to learn about our Church “primarily . . . because they were raised to believe that the religion was a cult, but their experience with Mormon friends and colleagues was not consistent with that stereotype.”¹⁰

Bettering Ourselves

Serving alongside others not only helps them to understand us, but it also motivates us to learn from them and become more aware that God is “no respecter of persons” (D&C 1:35). He assists good people in all faiths and cultures in their efforts to improve the lives of His children.

This recognition of the good in others helps us remain humble—as opposed to the Pharisees Jesus condemned for their spiritual pride (see Matthew 23) or the Zoramites,

DOCTRINAL POINTS

- God uses the honest in heart in all denominations and cultures to further His work on earth.
- Working with others not of our faith to advance good causes enables us to do more good than we could do alone.
- Respectful, friendly interfaith engagement decreases misunderstandings, builds feelings of brotherhood and sisterhood, and draws us closer to the Father of us all.

Participants discuss defending religious freedoms in an interfaith conference held in São Paulo, Brazil, in March 2013.



Below, from left: Bharatanatyam dancers perform in the Salt Lake Tabernacle during an Interfaith Music Tribute in February 2010. An audience member enjoys the tribute. In a Mormon Messages video, young adults from various faiths discuss the importance of sexual purity. Participants at the annual Interfaith Charity Quilting Bee held in Houston, Texas, USA, make quilts for needy families.

whom the Book of Alma portrays as exclusive and arrogant (see Alma 31). Openness to the good in others enables us to become better people.

Our love can expand from a close circle of family to encompass not only our friends but ultimately our neighbors—and even enemies. One Church member serving in the American military in post–World War II Japan told of his struggle with bitterness toward the Japanese people. After being welcomed into a shrine of worship by Japanese townspeople, however, he found that “their spirits touched mine, and I felt an amazing change in my feelings toward them. My bitterness melted. . . . I thought about what had happened in that shrine and the amazing transformation I felt toward the people there.”¹¹

Likewise, when we genuinely welcome others into our midst, they can undergo transformation as well. An Evangelical Christian who graduated from Brigham Young University wrote an article about

her experience and described her initial defensiveness toward the LDS students. But after finally forming meaningful friendships, she came to appreciate “the emphasis I felt Latter-day Saints placed on God’s nearness to humanity. I began recognizing that in an effort to retain God’s transcendence, I had sacrificed God’s imminence—and this realization had a profound effect on me.”¹²

In his address to Christian leaders, Elder Holland acknowledged the “risk associated with learning something new about someone else. New insights always affect old perspectives, and thus some rethinking, rearranging, and restructuring of our worldviews is inevitable.”¹³ In befriending people of other faiths, I often find myself analyzing our differences, trying to distinguish the cultural divides from the doctrinal ones, all the while trying to appreciate everything virtuous and lovely they have to offer. Indeed, the effort sometimes feels risky, but it is always worth it. In the process of





Alan Bachman, chairman of the Salt Lake Interfaith Roundtable, speaks in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in February 2012.



Three Latter-day Saint women attend Faith Feast, an intercultural progressive dinner in Spokane, Washington, USA. They and other attendees visited a local Muslim mosque, a Sikh gurdwara, and a Presbyterian church.

restructuring my paradigm, I find myself shedding more of my superficial cultural tendencies and coming closer to the essence of the gospel.

Several LDS groups invited my minister friend to speak on the topic of “loving our neighbor despite religious differences,” and she experienced a great deal of acceptance from those who attended. In turn, she invited several Latter-day Saints, including me, to speak to different congregations on the same topic. After the services, I found myself surrounded by congregants wanting to talk to me, hug me, and even shed tears of mutual love and understanding. In experiences like these, I have found Elder Holland’s conclusion to be true:

“When we look beyond people’s color, ethnic group, social circle, church, synagogue, mosque, creed, and statement of belief, and when we try our best to see them for who and what they are—children of the same God—something good and worthwhile happens within us, and we are thereby drawn into a closer union with that God who is the Father of us all.”¹⁴ ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTES

1. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, in Marjorie Cortez, “Catholic Community Services Honors Uchtdorfs, Eccles as Humanitarians of the Year,” Nov. 7, 2012, deseretnews.com.
2. See Quentin L. Cook, “Partnering with Our Friends from Other Faiths,” Aug. 9, 2010, patheos.com.
3. Orson F. Whitney, in Conference Report, Apr. 1928, 59.
4. Thomas S. Monson, in “The Mormon Ethic of Civility,” Oct. 16, 2009, mormonnewsroom.org.
5. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “Standing Together for the Cause of Christ,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2012, 44–46.
6. Joseph Walker, “Evangelical Leader Says LDS Church Is Not a Cult,” Oct. 10, 2011, deseretnews.com.
7. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Standing Together,” 44.
8. See Michael A. Neider, “The Voice of the People,” *Ensign*, Oct. 2012, 38–40.
9. See Blair D. Hodges, “Mormons, Methodists Meet to Consider Similarities, Compare Cultures, Theology, Music,” Feb. 25, 2012, deseretnews.com.
10. Joseph Walker, “University of Virginia Chair in Mormon Studies Named for Richard L. Bushman,” Oct. 12, 2012, deseretnews.com.
11. Ferron A. Olson, “Forgiveness at Wakayama,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2011, 57.
12. Sarah Taylor, in “An Evangelical Student’s Experience at BYU,” *Meridian Magazine*, ldsmag.com.
13. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Standing Together,” 49.
14. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Standing Together,” 49.