

MAKING ANY WARD “Home”

Starting over in a new ward or branch can be intimidating. Here are five tips for turning strangers into friends.

BY KATHRYN P. FONG

Years ago, when I returned to church on a regular basis after a period of inactivity, I was certain everyone in the ward knew I was a remorseful sinner looking for repentance. It seemed to me that their goodness was apparent in their bright smiles and sweet testimonies and that my sins made me dim and pitiful by comparison. Looking back, I realize that new people in a variety of circumstances can feel overexposed or especially sensitive. Walking into a new meetinghouse, sitting next to people you don't know, and singing from a hymnbook alone can be daunting tasks when you are filled with self-consciousness.

As a single woman with no children, I have found that starting over in a new ward can be intimidating. Yet that nerve-racking trip into a chapel filled with strangers is one I have made over and over as I have moved frequently to follow my career. Over the years I have learned

to adopt a new attitude about my ward and to work at eventually turning those strangers into friends and warm acquaintances. The following techniques can help all of us feel at home in any ward or branch, no matter where in the world we go.

Remember why we come to church. A chapel is a sacred and safe place for Heavenly Father's children to gather to worship Him. There we can be united in prayer, song, and purpose. Avoid judging others or assuming that others are judging you. It helps me to remember that everyone who makes the effort to come to church is trying, as I am, to partake of the Savior's Atonement and keep His commandments.

Introduce yourself. I've learned to seek out the bishopric and to introduce myself first thing so they know that I am new. After that, I make sure I know who the high priests group leader is because he will assign high priests as my home teachers. In addition, as a sister, I



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Swallow your nervousness, and introduce yourself to ward or branch members. As you get to know people, you will begin to feel at home at church.

Serving ward members and participating in meetings can help us get to know each other better and remember one another. These situations also give us the opportunity to introduce ourselves.

ensure I know who the members of the Relief Society presidency are. The ward clerk also needs my address and phone number, and he can request my records from my previous ward. These people have introduced me to other ward members, helped me find my way to ward and stake activities, and provided support when I have received a calling.

I used to sit in the last pew, close to the door, so that immediately following the closing prayer, I could dash out before anyone talked to me and asked me who I was. But walking in and out of meetings with your eyes cast down—or focused on the exit—does little to help you acclimate in a new ward.

Swallow your nervousness, and approach the person in front of you. Shake the hands of those who teach the classes you attend or who speak in sacrament meeting (you can meet them in the foyer afterward). If you take

a moment to scope the room before you sit down, you can meet different individuals and families each time you attend a meeting. Be bold enough to ask for a ride to a ward or branch activity. It's often easier to walk in with someone than to enter alone. Ask for a ward or branch directory; it will help you recall names. Before long, names and faces begin to match, and people are no longer strangers. Neither are you.

Serve. Find ways you can help neighbors and ward or branch members, even if it is as simple as holding a door open and greeting them as they enter. (This will help others remember you.) Sign up on volunteer lists.

Find out who is sick or hospitalized, and visit them. Accept callings. As appropriate, let the bishop or branch president know what skills you have to offer beyond your calling, and tell him he can count on you when the need arises.

Be prepared to participate. Sunday School and priesthood and Relief Society meetings follow a lesson schedule. Obtain the lesson manuals, read the lessons in advance, and be prepared to read scriptures or to illustrate the principles taught by sharing your life experiences. While public speaking can be overwhelming, settle your fears, and be prepared to share your testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel.

Look for new faces. Reach out to others in a way you would like them to reach out to you. After a while you'll find that you are "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). You are at home in your new Church family.

Ward or branch families are all-inclusive—no one should be left out. It may not be possible to always find friendship with each member, but if we share our love of the gospel, if our testimonies are pure, if we are willing to share one another's burdens, and if we exercise our desire to serve the Lord through serving one another, we are a family. I am grateful that no matter where I go in this world, every branch or ward consists of other children of Heavenly Father. I can truly testify that the ward I now attend is the happiest place for me to be. ■

