

# Breaking the **Language Barrier**



*Members all over the world are turning to the Lord to find ways to communicate with their brothers and sisters in the gospel.*

**BY MELISSA MERRILL**  
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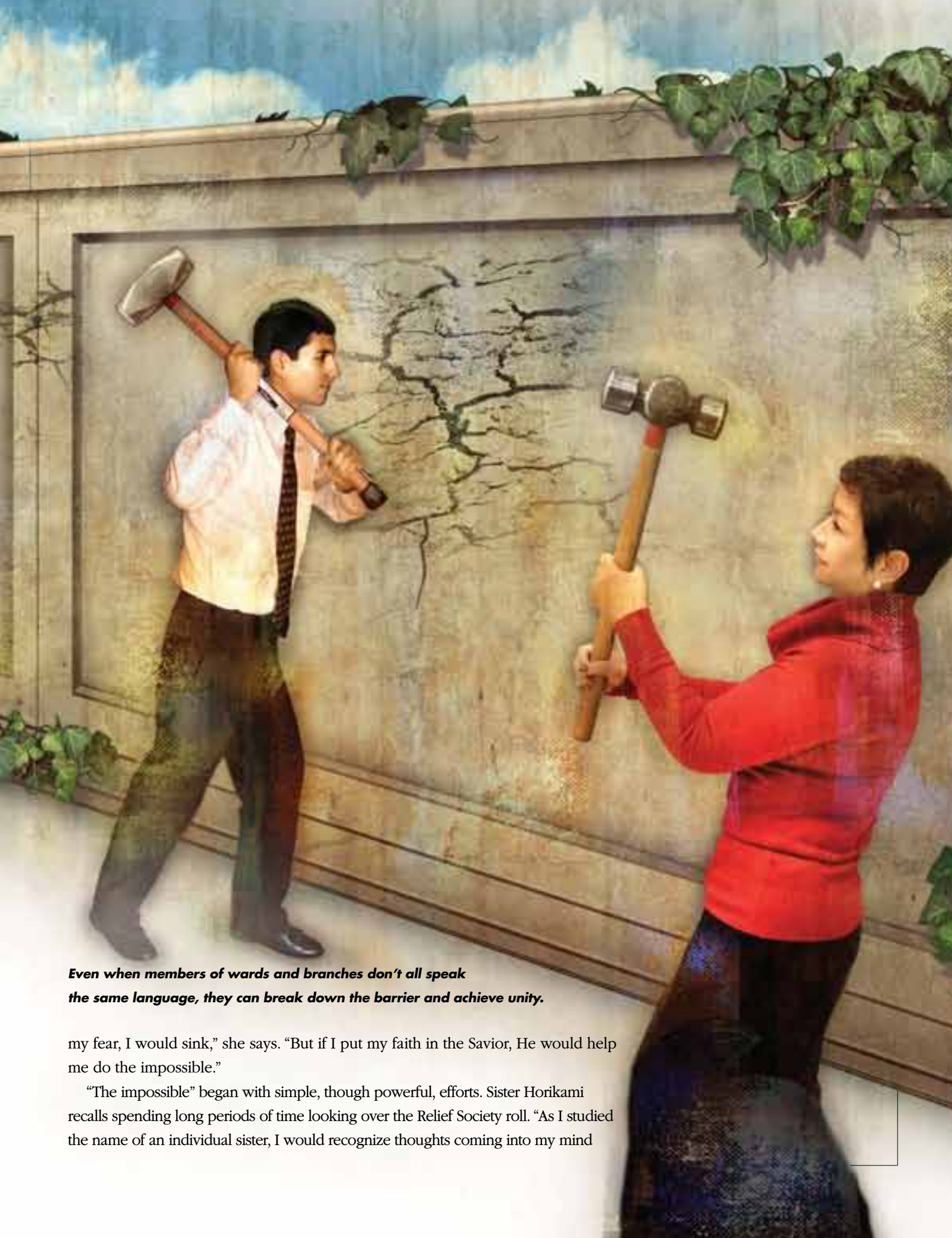
**W**hen Kazue Horikami moved from her native Japan to Hawaii as a young adult, she had little need to learn English. She spoke Japanese at home, did her shopping in areas where there was a high concentration of Japanese speakers, and later worked as a guide for Japanese tourists. The only place she sometimes encountered a language barrier was at church—a scenario common to many Latter-day Saints. But even at church she got along by building friendships with the three or four other sisters who spoke her native tongue.

Then, after more than 25 years of living in Hawaii, Sister Horikami was called to be the Relief Society president in her ward, a prospect that overwhelmed her. “Most of the sisters spoke only English, and others spoke only Samoan or Tagalog,” she remembers. “By that point I could *understand* other languages fairly well, but I was not confident

in *speaking* them. Even though I comprehended most of what my sisters said, I wondered how I could possibly serve them when I couldn’t even talk to them.”

Sister Horikami knew taking language classes wasn’t an option—she simply didn’t have the time. She expressed her concerns to her stake president during a temple-recommend interview. “I told him that I was afraid—not only of the responsibility but also of creating misunderstandings,” she says. The stake president paused thoughtfully and then told Sister Horikami not to worry about the language, at least not right away. “Just do your work the best you can,” he said. She promised she would.

Days later, when Sister Horikami was in the temple, the story of Peter walking on water came into her mind (see Matthew 14:22–33). “I realized that as long as I clung to



***Even when members of wards and branches don't all speak the same language, they can break down the barrier and achieve unity.***

my fear, I would sink," she says. "But if I put my faith in the Savior, He would help me do the impossible."

"The impossible" began with simple, though powerful, efforts. Sister Horikami recalls spending long periods of time looking over the Relief Society roll. "As I studied the name of an individual sister, I would recognize thoughts coming into my mind

## MORE IDEAS

Looking for additional ideas for transcending language barriers? Try these:

- When possible, provide curriculum materials for members in their native language. Visit the nearest Distribution Services center, or in North America, visit [www.ldscatalog.com](http://www.ldscatalog.com) for more information.
- Encourage members to subscribe to the *Liahona* in their native language or the language of the place where they live.
- In setting up home and visiting teaching assignments, consider members' native languages as well as languages they have learned on missions or at school.
- Teach members basic greetings or phrases in the language of members who don't speak the common language.
- Be patient and support each other in callings.
- Consider inviting members to teach things that don't center on language: cooking, gardening, or music, for instance.
- Consider providing interpretation services for those who need it. At [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org), select **Serving in the Church** and then **Interpreter's Resources** for more information.

about that sister, and I would feel promptings about ways I could serve her. As I followed those promptings, I was amazed to discover how specific and personal they were.

"That's how I started," she continues. "Over several months those small acts turned into relationships of care and concern, not only of my caring for them but of their caring for me."

Sister Horikami did eventually learn English, but she's quick to assert that it was the Spirit—not proficiency in any language—that helped her serve. "I learned that the Spirit isn't limited by language," Sister Horikami notes. "He speaks to *all* of us in ways we can understand."

Like Sister Horikami, members of the Church throughout the world have experienced the frustration and loneliness that can accompany language barriers. But also like Sister Horikami, they and their leaders can turn to the Lord for help. The following ideas for transcending the language barrier come from members and leaders all over the world.

### Realize That Language Is Secondary

Overcoming language barriers is a familiar challenge to the Frankfurt Germany Stake, where members come from more than 80 nations. But language, says stake president Axel Leimer, is of secondary importance.

President Leimer, whose own family didn't speak German when they first moved to Frankfurt, points out that his children and the children of other families are perhaps the best examples of this. "They were never slowed down by the fact that they didn't understand each other," he says. "They played with the other children anyway. To them, the language difference didn't matter at all. They had not yet learned to be prejudiced or afraid."

President Leimer notes that the many English-speaking missionary couples who serve in ward callings in the stake are not inhibited by language differences either. "Many of these couples do not speak German, but they bring a lot of experience to their assignments and make significant contributions," he says. "Sisters have served in the nursery, in Primary classes, and as librarians, including developing a library where none had before existed. Some of the brethren have served as high priests group leaders, finance clerks, and home teachers. They participate in classes (with someone translating their remarks) and sometimes even teach.

"The common foundation of the gospel is often all that people need," President Leimer continues. "I have observed conversations in the halls where neither party spoke the other's language, but somehow they still understood each other. You can communicate the important things regardless of language: 'I love the Lord. I care about my brothers and sisters. I am here to help.'"

### Help People Feel at Home

In many cases wards and branches are able to accommodate people in ways that help them feel at home. In the McCully Ward of the Honolulu Hawaii Stake, for instance, Sunday School is taught in eight languages (Chuukese, English, Japanese, Korean, Marshallese, Pohnpeian, Spanish, and Tagalog) so that most members can hear the gospel taught in their own tongue. Moreover, members who are called on to pray in sacrament meeting or classes do so in



their native language if they are not prepared to pray in the language of the majority of the members.

While the separate Sunday School classes serve an important role, the McCully Ward also makes efforts to plan activities that bring everyone together. Regular events such as an annual international food festival, cultural shows at Mutual, a Micronesian choir (in addition to the ward choir), and a quarterly “ohana night” (family night) with the entire ward celebrate members’ unique cultural heritages and highlight their common spiritual heritage.

“We are all children of our Heavenly Father,” says Marlo Lopez, bishop of the McCully Ward. “In His sight there is no distinction in race or language. The love of God is for everyone, and we are only instruments to teach this truth.”

### **Adopt the Culture of Where You Live**

While many people wish to retain fluency in their native language and uplifting elements of their culture, members can also benefit from learning the language and culture of the area in which they now live. President Eric Malandain of the Paris France East Stake, which includes members from throughout the world, promotes this. “Leaders generally encourage members living here to learn French,” President Malandain says. “It can help them improve professionally, personally, and spiritually.”

Members of the San Francisco California West Stake are encouraged to develop additional language skills too. In addition to the English-speaking wards, the stake includes three language-specific units (Chinese, Samoan, and Tagalog) so that the members speaking these languages can be taught the gospel in their own tongue. But stake and ward leaders

## **PRACTICE, PREPARATION, AND PRAYER**

**F**abiola Simona, from Indonesia, is now a member of the Hyde Park Branch in Sydney, Australia. She relates her experience with learning not only a new language but also the gospel as a convert to the Church:



“When I first joined the Church, I didn’t speak or understand English very well. Additionally, I was very shy, so it was difficult for me to even offer a prayer. I remember being asked to give the opening prayer in Sunday School one time. I wrote a draft on a piece of paper and then fixed the grammar before I felt comfortable praying in front of others.

“Later, when I was called as a teacher, I had to prepare weeks in advance. I worked hard. I thought, ‘If people have to endure my strong accent and broken grammar, I should at least prepare myself the best I can.’

“I prayed a lot for the Spirit to help me as I taught those lessons. I prayed that I wouldn’t be nervous and that people would understand what I was saying.

“That preparation and those prayers helped me in overcoming language barriers. Now, after more than nine years as a member of the Church, I can easily accept assignments to pray or to give a lesson. Additionally, I find that the more assignments I accept, the more confident I become.”

also encourage members to participate in conversation learning groups. The small “huddles” meet twice a week to cover basic conversational English. The lessons focus on learning how to say phrases such as “How do I get to the hospital?” or “Where is the nearest bus stop?” And since many members of the stake are also first-generation Latter-day Saints, some of the English lessons also focus on gospel basics, such as praying or conducting family home evening.

“The language issue is a significant challenge for us, but we work at it, and we keep getting better at it,” Ronald Dillender, stake president, says. “We will continue to work, to teach, and to give members access to every stake conference, every stake talent show, every training meeting, every function. We want *everyone* to have access to all that the Church and the gospel offer. That is extremely important.”

### **Work Together**

Differences in language present plenty of obstacles, says President Brent Olson of the Philadelphia Pennsylvania Stake, from performing temple-recommend interviews to translating talks and prayers in sacrament meeting. Adopting a welcoming, tolerant attitude has made all the difference for members of the stake.

President Olson says, “We have a theme we repeat often in our stake: whoever enters the doors of the chapel is sent from the Lord. When we adopt this attitude of acceptance, we realize that the extra effort we take in helping everyone participate isn’t a burden. It’s simply living the gospel.”

Although the Clendon Ward of the Auckland New Zealand Manurewa Stake is technically an English-speaking unit, members also speak Maori, Niuean, Samoan, Tongan, local dialects, and several languages spoken in the Cook Islands. Ward leaders are trying to become like the Good Shepherd, who knows every one of His flock—“regardless of what language they speak,” Bishop Hans Key says.

For instance, as home and visiting teaching assignments are prayerfully considered, companionships may be formed to include a brother who speaks only his native language and a brother who speaks that same language as well as English. As the two work together in home teaching, the first brother gains confidence in English. Later, he might be able to accept an assignment to speak in sacrament meeting.

### **Recognize That the Lord Qualifies Us for His Work**

Francisco Ayres Hermenegildo joined the Church in his native Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, at age 21 and later served a mission in São Paulo. After he and his wife, Kallya, were married, they moved to Sydney, Australia, in 2002. In 2006 Francisco was called to be the president of the Hyde Park young single adult branch. President Hermenegildo felt overwhelmed not only because he was still learning English but also because members of the branch were natives of more than 10 countries, and many of them were also learning English.

“I confess that we felt inadequate when we were called to look after the Hyde Park Branch,” President Hermenegildo says. “The language barrier seemed enormous, and we prayed to the Lord for His help. But I am learning that the Lord inspires, qualifies, and fortifies those who are engaged in building His kingdom.”

In addition to recognizing the Lord’s direction in his own life, President Hermenegildo sees it in the lives of the members of the branch—many of whom, like him, are first-generation members.

“Each of us has been brought here at this time in our lives for a reason,” he says. He explains that each member has an opportunity to grow in testimony, serve in callings, and share the gospel message with friends and loved ones.

“We believe that the prophecies related to the gospel filling the earth are happening,” says President Hermenegildo. “The members of the branch are and will be leaders wherever they go in the world. It is a great privilege to help prepare those leaders, which we do every time we teach and nurture members of the branch.”

### **Be of One Heart and One Mind**

“I believe it’s a blessing rather than a challenge to serve and work in a ward that is so diverse in its cultures and languages,” says Bishop Hans Key of the Clendon Ward. “God confounded the language of the people during the construction of the Tower of Babel, but we can strive for what the people in the City of Enoch achieved: to be of one heart and one mind and to dwell in righteousness.” (See Genesis 11:1–9; Moses 7:18.)

That unity was also emphasized by President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008): “We have become a great worldwide Church, and it is now possible for the vast majority of our

members to participate . . . as one great family, speaking many languages, found in many lands, but all of one faith and one doctrine and one baptism.”<sup>1</sup> ■

**NOTE**

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Living in the Fulness of Times,” *Liahona*, Jan. 2002, 4; *Ensign*, Nov. 2001, 4.

## WELCOME IN ANY LANGUAGE

By Marianne Hansen Rencher

**A**re you in a branch or ward whose members don't all speak the same language? As the Church continues to grow worldwide, this experience is becoming more common. For two years my husband and I attended such a branch in New York. My background in teaching English to speakers of other languages was helpful, but even if you don't have this experience, there's much you can do to bridge the communication gap with others who don't speak your native language.

**Smile and greet others.** Make an effort to learn how to say hello to others in their native language. But even if you can't speak a word of their language, you can still make them feel welcome. Every Sunday, Marta welcomed me with a warm hug and a greeting in Spanish. Although I didn't understand what she was saying, I felt her love through her hug and the tone of her voice.

**Answer with correct grammar.** People learn a language, in part, by hearing it. It is better for someone to learn “I don't have my manual” than “No have manual.” Even if another's speech is choppy, answer with correct language. This shows respect for others and helps them to learn the language correctly.

**Speak slowly, not loudly.** Words often blend together when we hear them, particularly if someone is learning a new language. When you speak, slow

down to make sure you are easy to understand. There's no need to speak louder unless the other person has difficulty hearing. If you're a teacher, you include non-native speakers when they have a chance to understand a question and form a simple response. Encourage others to help, thus creating a sense of friendship and ease within the classroom.

**Use visual aids.** Non-native speakers may not understand all the words in a lesson about the First Vision, for instance. But they will understand a picture of Joseph Smith kneeling in front of God and Jesus Christ. They will also be able to increase their vocabulary by associating the words you use with the account of the Restoration they already know.

**Write scripture and lesson references on the chalkboard.** This will make it easier for non-native speakers to locate the references. Fortunately, our lesson manuals and scriptures are available in a variety of languages. While someone reads them out loud, the other class members can follow along with materials in their own languages. Not only does this allow everyone to participate in class, but it also encourages class members to bring their scriptures and manuals.

**Be a better visiting teacher or home teacher.** Offer to assist those who are new to your country. For starters, you might help them shop, use the post office, or register for school.

Some of my most cherished friendships in New York were with those to whom I could barely speak five words in their language. I knew they needed my help, and that was enough to start a friendship. ■