

Gathering IN A *Unity* OF THE FAITH



Centers for young adults offer opportunities for gospel learning, social activities, missionary work, and activation efforts.



By Stephanie J. Burns

Barbara Matovu from Uganda. Sam Basnet from Nepal. And Elisabeth Olsen from Norway. Three different people, three different countries. Yet Barbara, Sam, and Elisabeth have all gathered in one place, the center for young adults in Oslo, Norway, under one truth: the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

These three joined the Church in Oslo, receiving the missionary lessons at the center for young adults. Facilities like the one in Oslo are dedicated to providing a place to socialize at activities, learn in institute classes, enjoy computer and Internet access, study for school, and even cook dinner.

Barbara moved from Uganda to Norway in 1998, when she was nine years old. Ten years later, while living in Oslo, two missionaries invited her to learn about the restored gospel, telling her that they could meet in the center for young adults. Barbara was skeptical, at best.

“I thought to myself, ‘Yet another youth center,’” she admits. “I had been to plenty of

places like that before, and I honestly never felt comfortable being in any of them.”

But this center proved to be different. “My mind was blown away when I took the first step into the door,” Barbara remembers. “I stood still for a moment, trying to figure out the feeling I had. I felt warmth and love. I felt assured that I was in the right place, with the right people, for the right cause.”

Gathering to the Centers for Young Adults

The initiative to build centers for young adults started in 2003. Centers expand the reach of institute by offering more than just religious education classes; young single adults also have opportunities to serve on a center activities council, work with full-time missionaries to help teach and activate their peers, and associate with a senior couple who keep the whole operation running. Local priesthood leadership, under the direction of Area Seventies, determines the creation of centers in their respective areas.

The first 4 centers were in Copenhagen, Denmark, and in Berlin, Hamburg, and Leipzig, Germany. Those initial 4 have since blossomed into 141 in 2011, in locations as diverse as Sweden and Cyprus. Many more are in various stages of development in other parts of the world, including the United States and Africa.

Gerald and Nancy Sorensen served at the



Above, from top:
Barbara Matovu,
Sam Basnet,
Elisabeth Olsen.



center for young adults in Trondheim, Norway. There they met young adults from countries all across the globe, including Afghanistan, China, Ghana, Iran, Iraq, Mozambique, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

“There were many languages, customs, and educational and religious backgrounds,” observes Brother Sorensen, “but all these young adults had a common bond in wanting to know more about their Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. As we got to know them and their personal dreams and challenges, it was easy to look at each one as a child of God. It was plain to see that God answered their prayers and guided their steps, showing His great love for them.”

President Armand Johansen of the Norway Oslo Mission feels that the young adults are being guided to the center for a purpose, including being trained for responsibilities in the future. “The Church in Norway is going to become more and more diverse,” he says. “The centers help the young adults know how to deal with that, to recognize how important the Church is as the common bonding element of all cultures and people,” says President Johansen. “I see the centers as great unifiers, places where you find a lowering of social barriers and biases.”



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Becoming Unified in Christ

Barbara Matovu remembers the first time the missionaries brought her to the center for an activity to meet other young single adults. She thought she knew what to expect.

“Throughout my life I’ve always had a group that I belonged to,” explains Barbara. “And the groups were always stamped with something—you were the sporty group or the international group or some other group. So when people started coming into the center,





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it was so strange because no one seemed to have the attitude of ‘I’m in the popular group, so I can’t talk to you.’

“At first, I thought, ‘Are they acting? Is this a show?’ But after a while I realized it actually doesn’t matter who we are or where we come from or which language we speak. The love of our Heavenly Father is for everyone. Usually it takes me a bit of time to find my group, but this time I felt like I didn’t need a group. I was just Barbara, and I could be Barbara for everybody.”

Elisabeth Olsen says she feels humbled to see her place in her heavenly family. “When you meet people from a different culture or society, it’s so easy to label them. I’ve learned to open up my eyes more and to see people through the eyes of Christ,” she says. “At the center we all have different cultural backgrounds, but we all have one thing in common: we want to be with Jesus Christ and God again.”

Becoming One but Not the Same

Some might be wary of the idea of unity because they think it must come at the cost of sacrificing individuality. “A lot of people are

scared of religion because they think that it makes us all the same, because we live by the same commandments,” explains Elisabeth. “But that’s not how it is at all. God made us all individuals. We may have the same beliefs, but we have different qualities and gifts, and that’s what makes us individuals. God wants us all to be different because we all have different missions.”

Sam Basnet has also fielded concerns from friends who believe religious rules are restrictive. “One friend told me, ‘If you go to church, you have to follow the rules of others,’” he reports. But Sam follows the standards of the Church because he has prayerfully sought personal revelation to confirm his actions.

And it’s by individually speaking to His children that God is unifying them, explains Sam. “God says that all nations and all tongues will worship Him” (see Mosiah 27:31), he says. “By meeting different people, I learn to appreciate different cultures. But experiencing such diversity also makes me feel that, yes, God has a great plan to unite us in peace.”

Arriving at the Ultimate Gathering Place

As much as these young adults appreciate the power of gathering to a center for young adults, these future leaders of the Church understand that it’s just the beginning. As Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught, one of the most important gathering places is the temple.¹

Sam has prepared to enter the house of the Lord by surrounding himself with good friends at the center. “By getting to know people from so many different places, it has helped me to feel positive about the world,” he says. “I want to be a good example for my friends, and this has made me more fit for God and more fit to enter His temple.”



STRENGTH IN KNOWING WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF GOD

“There is strength even in our very diversity. But there is greater strength in the God-given mandate to each of us to work for the uplift and blessing of all His sons and daughters, regardless of their ethnic or national origin or other differences.”

President Gordon B. Hinckley (1910–2008), *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (1997), 664.

One month after her baptism, Barbara first started thinking about attending the temple while she was at a family home evening lesson at the center. After the lesson, she started asking questions.

“Having friends who understood what the temple meant for them helped me understand what the temple might mean for me. As they explained to me about the temple, I felt the Holy Spirit,” Barbara recalls. “I realized that all the places I’d been thinking about getting married—a nice church or the beach—couldn’t even be compared to the temple. From that moment the temple was no longer just a building. It was something I wanted to look forward to and a place to one day enter with my future husband.”

Elisabeth has also included the temple as one of her most important goals. “Whenever I get to travel to a temple, I just smile like I won a million dollars,” she says. “I know that God wants everyone to go there and receive all the blessings and gifts He has in store for us. Going to the temple and being temple worthy are true success. I can enter the temple and be the closest to God—the closest to home—as I can get on this earth.”

The celestial kingdom is, of course, the ultimate gathering place, one where Barbara doesn’t want any empty seats. “Christ says that it is only through Him that we can come to Heavenly Father, but He also says that one of the biggest things we can do in life is to serve one another [see John 21:15–17]. And serving one another is helping somebody come home to Heavenly Father, because you don’t want to go alone.” ■

NOTE

1. See David A. Bednar, “Honorably Hold a Name and Standing,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 97.

GATHERING ACROSS THE GLOBE

The centers for young adults of the Church are organized under the direction of priesthood authority, often at the Area Seventy level. As of 2011, centers were found in 3 countries in Africa, 28 countries in Europe, 7 states in the United States, and the Dominican Republic. For more information, visit with your bishop or branch president.



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| Africa | Denmark | Scotland |
| Democratic Republic of the Congo | England | Slovenia |
| South Africa | Finland | Spain |
| Zimbabwe | France | Sweden |
| | Germany | Switzerland |
| | Greece | Wales |
| Central America | Hungary | |
| Dominican Republic | Iceland | United States |
| | Ireland | Arizona |
| Europe | Italy | California |
| Albania | Moldova | Georgia |
| Austria | Netherlands | Indiana |
| Belgium | Norway | Louisiana |
| Cape Verde | Poland | New Mexico |
| Cyprus | Portugal | Wisconsin |
| Czech Republic | Romania | |