



FROM Longing TO Belonging

At first I felt out of place in my new ward. But a few key decisions helped make the transition a smooth one.


By Jennifer Brinkerhoff

In my first weeks attending a family ward as a single adult, I felt as though I had a spotlight over my head and a neon sign announcing that I was not married. Because my new ward seemed to be filled with couples—many of whom were younger than I was—I felt vulnerable and out of place. I had attended a singles ward for more than a decade and had become familiar with the unique culture that these wards foster. There, I had become comfortable and in some ways complacent.

It didn't take me long to discover that I had some important decisions to make about what I would do to integrate into my new ward. The following are a few of the choices I made based on principles I believe can be applied to a variety of situations, whether we are married or single.

Be Quick to Observe

One of the greatest challenges I initially faced was a feeling of isolation because I sat alone. I decided that instead of focusing on how I felt different, I would begin to observe who might need my help. I discovered that to fill voids or overcome insecurities, I must act intentionally rather than wait for someone to take care of me or ask me to help. For instance, I asked a neighbor whose husband was completing his hospital residency and was often gone on Sundays if I could sit with her and help manage her



two small boys. When the family moved away, I developed a habit of standing at the back of the chapel before the meeting to see if there might be someone I should meet or who might need some help.¹ Doing this has proved a great opportunity to trust and follow the promptings of the Spirit.

Attending church with an attitude of “what can I give today?” rather than “what will I get today?” has been a great blessing in my life. I love to talk with the young women in my ward and learn what is going on in their lives. I am happy to walk the halls with an upset toddler while his or her parents are teaching a priesthood or Relief Society lesson. I have learned how to prayerfully seek to act without an assignment. In short, I am finding that I must *do*—that I can create and act upon opportunities to serve without being asked, told, or solicited.

Seek to Build Unity

The Spirit, I am learning, is a great equalizer. It could be easy to feel different and separate because of my singleness. Yet I know that I find peace in seeking to build relationships on common ground. For example, I found that a married woman struggling with infertility could describe my desires for marriage better than I could, and that my ability to understand the heartache of a recently divorced woman was greater because I had learned to turn to the Savior when I experienced my own loneliness. I have found that as covenant makers and keepers, and in many other ways, we as members of the Church have more in common than we have differences.

There are many opportunities where we can come to know other people and build unity. Home and visiting teaching is a natural setting for learning about people and discovering our similarities. As I have visited with other sisters and discovered what was hidden in their “quiet hearts,”² I have recognized what we have in common. The passing moments between classes or while walking in the hall have also become cherished exchanges for me.

I feel that it is important to know and use people’s names and to watch for those who are new. As I’ve



learned to extend the kind of welcome that I desired as a new ward member, I've realized that it creates a deeper connection for me in the ward. It also helps to ease the transition that we all face as we join a new ward family.

I continue to marvel at how much I have in common with the members of my ward. I find that when I choose to minister to the needs of others, things really do work together for my good (see Romans 8:28).

Accept Selfless Service

Selfless service fills in the cracks of disappointment and unmet expectations. It is a vital key to adjusting to any transition. Yet it took several months before I received a calling in my new ward. In retrospect, I feel that this may have been the Lord's way of developing within me a desire to serve without having a specific calling.

One month after moving in, I gratefully accepted a compassionate service assignment from Relief Society leaders to take a meal to a family with newborn triplets. This opened up a great opportunity. There were two parents and three infants, and they would need help! Many Sundays, I was able to tend one of the babies for part or all of the meeting.

As I have consciously followed the promptings of the Spirit by actively believing that my ward is exactly where I belong, I have learned to accept assignments for service, whether the assignment comes from a leader or from the Spirit. I have also learned to accept others' kindness toward me.

On his first visit, one of my home teachers in my new ward expressed to me that he felt honored to provide priesthood watchcare to my roommate and me. I came to know that he meant it because as each week passed, he made sure to make some kind of contact

with me, even if it was a simple but sincere "hello" at church. Even though this man had a priesthood companion in his assignment, his wife also acted as a partner to him in service and was equally generous in her love and support.

I have also been blessed with intuitive bishops who quickly respond to my needs. Without fail, my bishop seems to know when to ask "how are you *really* doing?" when I need it the most. He listens with compassion and encouragement.



I also recognize that bishops are busy and have many needs to meet. One of the best ways I have learned to help him is simply to communicate my needs with authenticity and openness and then ask for ways that I can help him. As I am seeking for ways to lighten his load rather than add to it, I am creating greater ties to the ward.

Belong

For me, attending my family ward has brought a sense of belonging. It isn't always easy, but as I choose not to focus on what I *don't* have, I see what I *do* have. There is a greater dimension in my Sunday worship and daily

fellowshipping. There are greater connections to individuals and families of all ages and situations. I feel a deeper sense of belonging to my community, my stake, and my ward.

I am grateful for my years in the singles ward where I was given opportunities for leadership and service. I know that those years prepared me for what was to come. However, I am gratefully overwhelmed with the opportunity to actively participate in the blessings of belonging as I serve in my "family ward," a ward that has become my family. ■

NOTES

1. This was inspired by the actions of Susan Bednar, as described by Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in "Quick to Observe," *Ensign*, Dec. 2006, 33.
2. See "Lord, I Would Follow Thee," *Hymns*, no. 220.

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UNITY: MORE MUST BE DONE

"As we think of the great growth of the Church, the diversities of tongues and cultures, and the monumental tasks that yet lie before us, we wonder if there is any more important objective before us than to so live that

we may enjoy the unifying spirit of the Lord. As Jesus prayed, we *must* be united if the world is ever to be convinced that he was sent by God his Father to redeem us from our sins.

"It is unity and oneness that has thus far enabled us to bear our testimony around the globe, bringing forward tens of thousands of missionaries to do their part. More must be done. It is unity that has thus far enabled the Church, its wards and stakes, branches and districts, and members, to construct temples and chapels, undertake welfare projects, seek after the dead, watch over the Church, and build faith. More must be done. These great purposes of the Lord could not have been achieved with dissension or jealousy or selfishness. Our ideas may not always be quite like those who preside in authority over us, but this is the Lord's church and he will bless each of us as we cast off pride, pray for strength, and contribute to the good of the whole."

President Howard W. Hunter (1907–95), "That We May Be One," *Ensign*, May 1976, 106.