



We Can Do Better:

# WELCOMING OTHERS into the Fold

*Here are four ways you can help new and returning members feel like they belong.*

*Note: No matter how strong someone's belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ, staying faithful can be difficult for new and returning members if they feel like they don't belong. In this article we examine what members who are already in the fold can do to welcome others in. In the December issue we will look at what those who feel they're on the outside can do to find their place.*

**By Betsy VanDenBerghe**

**W**ithin a month of Melissa's (all names have been changed) baptism in the midwestern United States, she offered the opening prayer in sacrament meeting. She was nervous about praying publicly but "felt every confidence in my ability to speak to my Heavenly Father," she recalls. "After all, I had been praying for years, especially while investigating the Church, and could feel the Holy Ghost helping me."



So it was with surprise that she received an email from a ward member who described “in great detail” all of the ways her prayer was wrong. Shame, embarrassment, and an onslaught of doubt raced through Melissa until she felt prompted to call the returned missionary who had taught her. “He quickly assured me that it was totally inappropriate for this member to criticize me in such a way,” she says. “He also told me the bishopric would never ask another member, as I had assumed, to give me this kind of feedback.”

Reassured, Melissa remained active in the ward, accepted callings, and went on to flourish in her faith.

But it took several months to get over the pain and lost confidence from receiving that discouraging email.

Unfortunately, Melissa’s story is not unique. Many new and returning members face significant, but often avoidable, challenges from feeling like they don’t belong. Sometimes even those with strong testimonies struggle to remain faithful when they feel excluded. In a recent video series titled *Unity in Diversity*, Church leaders address this issue, encouraging members to be more sensitive, inclusive, and loving in our interactions.

The following stories help to illustrate how we as members can apply these principles and offer genuine





friendship and emotional support to those who hunger for heartfelt acceptance in the Lord's Church.

### Be a Friend in the Faith

*"When anyone's shadow darkens the door of a chapel, they ought to feel immediately embraced and loved and lifted and inspired . . . to go and be better because they know the Lord loves them and because they have friends in their faith."*

—Carol F. McConkie, First Counselor in the Young Women General Presidency

Melissa needed genuine friends, especially in her ward, she could approach when she needed advice or help. Her husband and daughter hadn't joined the Church with her.

"Coming to church and seeing all the families made me feel deeply alone," she says. Everyone was friendly, but even their happiness made her feel as though "I would never attain that Mormon glow because I was the only one with problems."

In addition to the returned missionary who had taught her, Melissa was blessed with Cindy, an online friend who had first introduced her to the Church. "It was hard to watch Melissa struggling in her local area as I looked on helplessly," Cindy explains. "So I created a private Facebook group with a few incredibly grounded, loving, diverse members who helped and befriended her in ways I could never do alone."

The group not only offered a sense of inclusion for Melissa while she found her place in her ward but also responded to questions about lifestyle and cultural concerns. "I was raised in tank tops and short shorts," Melissa says. She appreciated online friends who responded with photos of outfits she could check out in local stores. This encouraged her



to ask sisters in her ward for movie recommendations after she no longer felt comfortable with some selections in her collection.

An important aspect of friendship, Melissa points out, is that she sought the advice. Unsolicited advice feels like intrusion rather than inclusion, an invasion of privacy that can be hurtful to those who aren't prepared for it.

Eventually, Melissa was called to teach in Relief Society. Her calling provided opportunities to interact with others in the ward. Melissa shared with the sisters her difficulties not only in adjusting as a new member but also in dealing with an autistic child, some personal health issues, and "Oh, and my dog is dying." The experience of having other sisters listen and respond with their own difficulties in class and in private conversations proved deeply healing. These connections helped Melissa feel that she finally had true friends in the faith.

### **Include Everyone**

*"The Savior commanded His followers to 'love one another; as I have loved you' (John 13:34; emphasis added).*

*So we look at how He loved us. . . . If we make Him our role model, we should always be trying to reach out to include everyone."*

—Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Robert, an investigator in Canada, has attended a variety of LDS meetings and activities. He has researched various religions but continues studying the Church because of the inspiration he has found in its doctrine and the Book of Mormon. He attends institute to learn more and finds the social environment "refreshingly wholesome, friendly, with a really good vibe," he says. "Mormons are the nicest people in the world."

A self-described introvert, Robert wants to interact but says, "I tend to hug the walls, unsure of how to be part of the groups, some of them long-term LDS friends who don't seem to need anyone else." But it doesn't take much to ease this sense of isolation. During an activity, he recalls, "someone came up to me after dinner and encouraged me to stay for the movie; otherwise, I would have left, but instead I had a great time. I just needed to know that someone wanted me there."

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL INTERACTIONS WITH NEW MEMBERS AND INVESTIGATORS**

- Go out of your way to warmly greet them, interact with them, and introduce them to other members.
- Invite them into your home or to other activities so that they will have friends during the week as well as on Sunday.
- Listen and ask questions that help them feel understood.
- Share your own stories of overcoming difficulties so they know that we all struggle.
- Wait for them to ask for your advice, and when offering it, don't be prescriptive or overbearing.
- Allow priesthood and Relief Society leaders to give ecclesiastical direction; fellow members should worry more about being a good friend.
- Avoid comparing their progress to your own or anyone else's.
- Teach the fundamental doctrines of the Church, not cultural tendencies.
- While you can look for opportunities online to reach out to new converts, investigators, and less-active members, in-person friendships can be more meaningful.

Like Melissa, he appreciates LDS friends who explain doctrine but don't get too specific about how to live it. Friends who listen more than they admonish are like "someone who walks beside you, as opposed to pushing from behind to make you go faster. Most of the time, you just trip and stumble."

Robert has struggled to give up smoking. His discomfort illustrates how those who are new are deeply aware of their differences. "Not one member has ever said anything to me about smelling like smoke," he says. "Yet if my clothes aren't fresh out of the laundry, I will stay home from institute or church."

We can create a greater sense of belonging as we reassure and include those who are new to the Church. Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles says, "It breaks my heart if someone comes and is very vulnerable and says . . . , 'I want to be here,' and then gets a cold shoulder or a lack of interest. That's tragic. . . . We have to be better than that" ("Is There a Place for Me?" [video], [lds.org/media-library](https://www.lds.org/media-library)).

### Put Yourself Out There

*"When you choose to put yourself out there, you are blessing someone else's life. . . . Can you look for the person who is sitting on the outside, sitting on the fringe? . . . When you've opened your heart to other people, you see that we all belong."*

—Jean B. Bingham, Relief Society General President

After Elsa joined the Church in the Netherlands, she experienced a genuine connection with a loving Heavenly Father. But as a young single adult, she also dealt with loneliness when family members and friends felt uncomfortable with her new religious beliefs and habits. "The best thing members have done for me," she said, "is to willingly befriend me outside of church. Some go to the temple to do baptisms with me even though they have been endowed. I need to interact with members beyond Sunday to get strength and endure to the end."

Elsa feels like her biggest challenge as a recent convert is "the expectation to suddenly understand everything," she says. "All the acronyms, events, callings. It can be a little mind-blowing, and I sometimes worry people are judging me for not learning faster." Additionally, like many others, she experiences social anxiety that "keeps me comfortable sitting toward the back of the chapel, rarely interacting." Large groups are daunting, and she wonders if others judge her for her lack of participation. "It's not that I don't want to take part in the lessons or sing hymns openly or say a public prayer," she explains. "It's just that I'm afraid I might actually burst out crying in front of these people I don't really know yet."

Sister McConkie says: "I know people who come to church every Sunday so that they can be inspired and uplifted and who just simply walk away feeling judged and unloved—unneded, like there is no place for them at church. We need to do this differently."

Members who are nonjudgmental, Elsa says, help her the most. "They listen to my dilemmas and don't intrude into my personal space. They act with sincerity and patience while I learn for myself what being a member is all about." In spite of her anxiety, she accompanies the missionaries and looks out for new members and investigators. "I know how it feels to be new," she explains, "and want to make sure no one turns away from the gifts of the gospel that saved me from despair."

### Live the Gospel, Become Disciples

*"People can bring different gifts and perspectives. The wide range of experience and backgrounds and challenges that people face will show us what really is essential in the gospel of Christ. And much of the rest that's been, perhaps, acquired over time and is more cultural than doctrinal can slip away, and we can really learn to be disciples."*

—Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

In spite of having previously been critical of the Church, Jim joined because he received "an unquestionable spiritual testimony from the Holy Ghost that testified of the





truth of the gospel and its doctrine.” One of his greatest challenges, however, was adapting to LDS culture.

After baptism, he discovered that many generally accepted behaviors among members were cultural rather than doctrinal. “While this happens in any organized religion,” he explains, “I felt that if I didn’t conform in certain ways, I would be accused of not fully embracing the gospel. My struggles weren’t with the gospel or doctrine but with a level of conformity that felt only cultural.”

As Elder Christofferson explains, we need our new converts, investigators, and others to help us shed non-doctrinal practices that have accumulated over time and become true disciples.

Extolling the benefits of interacting with people of different backgrounds, Elder Oaks encourages Latter-day Saints to avoid focusing on differences and, instead, begin by asking, “Where are you coming from? What are your basic values? What do you want to accomplish?” This kind of openness and acceptance, in turn, helps those new to our circle feel included, lifted, loved, and ready to embrace salvation within the body of Christ.

Like Church leaders today, the Apostle Paul worried about divisions in the ancient Church of Christ. He urged members with strong opinions to avoid offending fellow Saints about practices that did not, in the end, really matter, explaining that while “knowledge puffeth up, . . . charity edifieth” (1 Corinthians 8:1). He called for “no divisions among you” and to focus on “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” rather than on the ways members differ from each other (1 Corinthians 1:10; 2:2).

Today, modern apostles and prophets urge us to find unity in diversity, encouraging us to make room for each member of the Church of Christ as an important part of our purpose to come to a “unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God . . . unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). ■

*The author lives in Utah, USA.*

### **WATCH UNITY IN DIVERSITY**

Watch a series of short videos from Church leaders on what it means to belong to the Church at [lds.org/go/unity917](https://lds.org/go/unity917).