



We Can Do Better, Part 2:

# Finding Your Place in the Church of Jesus Christ

*Don't let others keep you from enjoying the blessings of membership in Christ's Church.*



By Betsy VanDenBerghe

*Editors' note: No matter how strong our belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ is, it can be difficult to remain faithful if we don't feel like we belong. Church leaders recently addressed this challenge in a video series titled Unity in Diversity. In the September 2017 issue, "We Can Do Better: Welcoming Others into the Fold" examined our responsibility to welcome others. This article, part 2, looks at how we can take responsibility for our own faith, regardless of whether we feel like we belong.*

After eight years of not attending church, Paulo (all names have been changed) received a phone call from his bishop in Brazil asking how he was doing. Paulo had longed to return, but many concerns kept him from full activity. How could he avoid comparing himself, still single, to those married with children? Would he

find any friends at church after so long and, if he did, what would they think of him? Would he still be able to feel the Spirit like he had during his conversion and mission or have enough faith to accept callings?

One month after the phone call, Paulo watched President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, give a conference talk called, "Come, Join with Us."<sup>1</sup> "That talk hit me hard," he recalls, and within a few weeks he found himself sitting in the church parking lot, trembling and offering a silent prayer for the strength to get out of the car and enter the building.

"Everything wasn't perfect," he recalls of his first year after returning. It wasn't easy to fit in. Yet a feeling of connectedness to the Savior and a strong desire for a temple recommend helped him overcome his insecurities. He began reading his scriptures and praying again. "If you don't give up, you gain strength and can feel the Lord blessing you," he advises those who struggle to feel accepted. "I have a testimony that this is Christ's Church, but it's in Him you will find true belonging."

Paulo's story represents several points that Church leaders describe in the video series *Unity in Diversity*. Their messages offer hope and advice to those who don't feel like they belong. Sometimes we feel alone even in church, but, as these leaders and members point out, there are things we can do to help get ourselves through challenges such as exclusion or poor treatment by others. We can avoid comparisons, move forward in uncertainty, know that returning is always possible, and above all, trust the Savior.

#### **Avoid Comparisons: We Will All Be Blessed in the End**

*"When you begin to compare yourself, one with another, it either leads to discouragement or it leads to pride. . . . Blessings come in the near-term. Blessings come in the long-term. Sometimes blessings are in store for us, I believe, after we pass through the veil. . . . Ultimately, we can be assured that the promise of eternal life is for everyone."*

—Elder Gary E. Stevenson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Rochelle moved to a modest duplex in an affluent area in the western United States after spending time in a homeless shelter. Divorced and caring for several children, she worked at two jobs, sometimes three, to be able to afford food and rent, and had been less active, off and on, since her conversion.

“Even though just about everyone in my new ward seemed better off than I was,” she explains, “they reached out to me and accepted the way I dress. Everyone really cared.”

Although under significant financial pressure, Rochelle never resented others for their easier circumstances. “I want to be more secure, definitely, but I never looked at my neighbors’ houses and felt that God had left me behind,” she recalls. “I could feel Him walking beside me even through my poor choices.”

Although Rochelle’s work schedule has been a challenge at times, ward leaders and friends ultimately helped her fulfill a yearning to attend the temple. “Going to the temple regularly helps me be grateful for how far I’ve come,” she observes. “I don’t worry that others might seem ahead of me.”

Rochelle admits that she and her daughters struggle and “are not a perfect LDS family.” Yet she also recognizes that

“everyone has problems and no family is really perfect,” a perspective that liberates her from looking sideways at others instead of focusing on her relationship with God.

“My daughters can see what a difference the gospel has made in my life,” she says. “I can feel the difference too and am busy enough with work, family, and Church that I don’t have time for comparisons. I’m just happy to be on the right path.”

### **Stay Strong: Christ Can Transform You**

*“This person sitting next to me ignoring me or even wanting to moving away . . . doesn’t change the reality of what Christ feels toward me and the possibilities I have in Christ. . . . Every individual needs to be determined that they’re going to have a place in the kingdom of God [and in] the body of Christ, and others who are thoughtless or careless or worse can’t prohibit that.”*

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

Growing up, Matthew attended church in small branches. He and his wife, a convert from Ukraine, grew accustomed to multiple callings and full engagement with international LDS communities but then moved to the United States. Large wards and different cultural expectations made them feel “unneeded and adrift,” he recalls. “We seemed unable to fit in. We felt ignored, with a lack of uplift and connection on Sundays.”

Their frustration reached a breaking point when, after moving to a different city, Matthew and his wife looked forward to a visit from a local priesthood leader whose purpose in visiting ended up being to ask them to keep their lively toddler under control during sacrament meeting. Deeply hurt, Matthew contemplated never returning to the local meetinghouse. “What stopped me,” he explains, “was my testimony that this is the Lord’s Church and that the Savior wants me there. Participating in the gospel has consequences beyond any hurt or personal encounter I’ll have in this life.”

Church situations can sometimes make us feel lonely, marginalized, and unneeded, a phenomenon that isn’t





unique to Latter-day Saints. Catholic writer David Mills describes the challenge that church-goers face in interacting with those who are “wealthier or poorer, more or less educated than you. They may be of a different race or ethnic group or age than you.” We might not choose any of them for our various social networks, he explains. However, religious commitment involves mingling with people we do not choose and “provides one of the few places left that’s more like a community than a network. . . . You have to learn to love these people, or at least to act lovingly, when you don’t want to.”<sup>2</sup> Relying on God when you can’t block or unfollow people in your religious community is often the only way to overcome the challenge.

Matthew found this reliance on the divine crucial to staying active in the Church. “The only thing that’s kept me going sometimes is my testimony of Christ,” he explains. “The gospel is bigger than any of us. Christ sees what we cannot see, knows what we can become, and has room for all.”

Jasmin, a member in the southern United States, admits that “I had a hard time getting along with a sister in my ward who seemed to meddle in my life too much, and I let that drive me away.” But when concern for her little boy began to outweigh the uncertainty of what it would be like

to return, Jasmin knew it was time to “not let others’ opinions of me turn me away from Christ—whether or not I felt that someone in the ward looked down on me.”

She mustered up enough courage to venture out in a heavy storm one Sunday to where her small family soon felt embraced by friends who could help them grow in the Church of Jesus Christ. “I regret leaving,” she says. “But I’m grateful that I didn’t give up and that I pushed forward, because the gospel isn’t about others—or even me—it’s about my Savior.”

### **Take a Step into the Darkness: The Light Will Follow**

*“The natural man and the natural woman says, ‘There is no way I’m taking this step [and] moving into the darkness until the light moves and I can see where I’m going. The requirement is that we take the step, anticipating that when our foot hits the ground, the light will move.’”*

—Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Sometimes it’s difficult for new members to stay rooted in the gospel when they don’t have a complete assurance of what the future holds. Learning about this aspect of faith for Mei-Hsin, a homemaker in Taiwan, involved the gospel admonition to bring children into the world, a challenging



step because “many in my culture have one child or have a pet instead,” she observes. Each pregnancy has required her to have faith to step into the unknown and ignore sometimes intense criticism from relatives and the culture at large.

Often, moving forward requires stepping into the unknown, which can be intimidating to those new in the faith. It requires developing trust that the Lord will help them along the path. Having unease and uncertainty, Elder Bednar assures, is a normal part of our learning and growing process, but sometimes our steps into the unknown—whether they involve forming a family or returning to participation in the Church—can be particularly daunting because the witness comes after the trial of our faith (see Ether 12:6). Mei-Hsin and her husband received such a witness after creating a family. “We are happy and so grateful for our children,” she says. “We’ve learned to live frugally, to help and love each other. I’m grateful we brought them into the world.”

Often, the initial steps are the hardest. “The first time we [step into the darkness],” according to Elder Bednar, “it’s not doubt, but there’s a little bit of uncertainty, even a little bit of apprehension, which is quite normal.” While the

process of moving ahead can’t be totally smooth (“not a perfect cycle that’s never interrupted,” he explains), we can gradually grow “line upon line,” with our faith increasing incrementally.

Moving forward takes practice, advises Lazare of Georgia, a convert in the country bordering Russia and Europe. Learning to trust LDS friends was his first step, after which he agreed to accept a priesthood blessing. “Then I could move forward with the missionary discussions,” he explains. As Lazare’s faith in Jesus Christ increased, “I took the big step of baptism even though I wasn’t 100 percent certain. But the Lord gave me courage with each phase, and I am so grateful now that I did it.”

### Don’t Give Up

*“People who think they’ve sinned too much or gone too far or been away for too long and somehow can’t come back into the circle: My declaration is no one can fall lower than the light of Christ shines. That isn’t possible.”*

—Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Growing up in a devout LDS family in Utah, USA, Brian felt like the Church wasn’t for him. “I enjoyed fantasy games, movies, and rock music,” he says, “not Scouts,

scriptures, seminary, and sports.” As soon as he could leave home, he moved into an apartment and “opened myself to the world, including sex and drugs.” After an extended period of what Brian calls “riotous living and experimentation,” he ran into financial troubles and his parents took him in again, although he did not return to church.

The birth of a baby sister caused Brian to reevaluate his views. When he held her for the first time, he recalls, “I knew she was not just another kind of animal.” Somewhat apprehensively, he attended her baby blessing, and when the sacrament came to him, “I passed it on without partaking, but part of me felt spiritually hungry for it.”

Trying to sort out his conflicted feelings, Brian started keeping a journal. “I stayed up writing about my spiritual dilemma late one night,” he says, “and I had my first spiritual experience, though not with the good side.” He felt an evil, hateful, angry force trying to take over his soul. “After that,” he explains, “I knew I needed the Lord.” But having strayed so far, Brian wondered, “Could I be worthy of His help and protection?” He also questioned whether he could ever partake of the sacrament again.

The road back was hard. Giving up cigarettes wasn’t easy, confessing to the bishop took courage, and turning from old friends and activities was difficult. His family, girlfriend, and bishop all supported him, but Brian discovered his main source of strength in Jesus Christ.

“I found the Lord eager to help me,” he remembers. “New opportunities opened to replace my old pursuits. The more effort I put into living the gospel, the clearer my pathway became.” As Brian trusted the Lord and discovered His willingness to forgive and heal, the sacrament took on a greater meaning for him and helped bring him closer to the Savior. “While I’d eaten the bread and water at church as a child hundreds of times, I was finally able to partake of the sacrament for what felt like the first time.”

### No One Can Take Your Place

Stepping out of the car and entering church, reaching out to other members, overcoming hurtful situations,

living the gospel without complete assurance about what the future holds, and confessing sins—we all walk difficult and uncertain paths on our way to the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 8).

Our personal commitment to following the Savior is essential for safe arrival. While encouragement, love, and acceptance from fellow Church members and leaders are important, each of us may face times when we must be willing to follow the Savior, even if we feel like we’re doing it alone.

Take your place in Jesus Christ’s Church. Don’t compare, let Christ transform you, take steps of faith that will be rewarded, and know that it’s never too late to return. “Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life” (2 Nephi 31:20). ■

*The author lives in Utah, USA.*

#### NOTES

1. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign or Liahona*, Nov. 2013, 21–24.
2. David Mills, “Go to Church, Meet Annoying People,” Feb. 1, 2017, [aleteia.org/2017/02/01/go-to-church-meet-annoying-people](http://aleteia.org/2017/02/01/go-to-church-meet-annoying-people).

