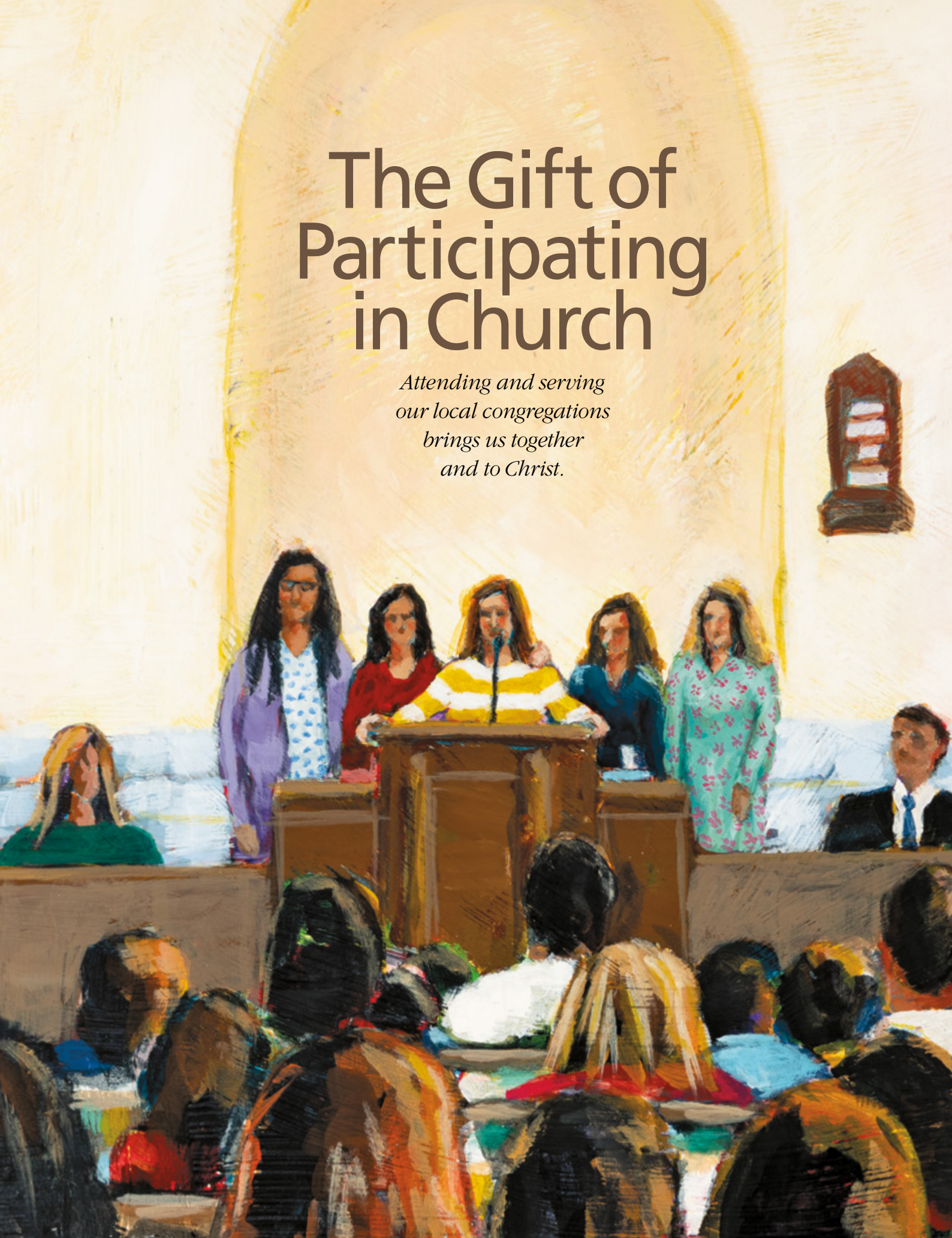


The Gift of Participating in Church

*Attending and serving
our local congregations
brings us together
and to Christ.*



By Kate Holbrook and Samuel Brown

June (name has been changed), a 12-year-old young woman in our ward, sat on the stand, staring at the congregation. As the deacons finished passing the sacrament and returned to their seats, Brother Cazier announced that June was our youth speaker. Many eyes looked to June as she shook her head to say she was not ready to take her turn. My husband, Sam, and I exchanged concerned looks.

Brother Cazier looked at the next speaker, a man new to the ward, and caught his eye. The man stood up and delivered a talk that was smart, spirited, and funny, and for a moment we forgot about June's stage fright.

When he was finished, though, we saw that June had been crying. She moved to the podium but no words came out. In the congregation, we worried she would criticize herself later if she didn't give the talk. She held a written copy in her hands; she only needed to read it.

"Help her give this talk," we silently prayed.

Another young woman walked toward the stand. Before she reached the podium, three other young women left

the safety of the congregation to share the weight of June's vulnerability and offer her support. None of the young women spoke a word, but they gathered around June at the podium. A hand patted June's, an arm circled her shoulders, and together they faced the audience as June opened her mouth, tested her voice, and delivered her talk. Now the tears were on our cheeks instead of hers.

Later, June told us, "It was definitely a positive experience for me. I realized how blessed I am to have an amazing group of young women step outside of their comfort zone just to make me feel loved."¹

We've often thought about what guided those young women that day to such a powerful act of unity. The answer is rich, but it is also simple: church participation prepared them. Through participation in church, they knew each other and were aware of each other's needs; they had learned to give and receive service; and they were actively developing the ultimate virtue of charity. The covenants, Holy Spirit, and priesthood ordinances they experienced in church turned effective social structures into a force both holy and transformative.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHANIE HOCK





A Community of Saints

By helping us to know each other and be known, church participation acts as an antidote to the sometimes isolating, angry, and divisive environments we live in. In other words, while the world sometimes divides us, church unites us. The relationships we develop, the unity we experience, the comforting Spirit that comes to us all as we worship together with fellow Saints—all contribute to making church a community that deeply blesses all of us.

In the words of Sister Reyna I. Aburto, Second Counselor in the Relief Society General Presidency, “To reach our sublime destiny, we need each other.”²

That need is met each week as we are strengthened by each other’s testimonies, service, compassion, and unique life experiences. While some critics of the Church claim that all members are the same, wards and branches are actually richly diverse, filled with members of different ages, backgrounds, political persuasions, and socioeconomic statuses.

By worshipping and serving together, we’ve developed lasting, loving relationships with people we wouldn’t have otherwise known. For example, as a couple we became close friends with a man in our ward who had been homeless for several years before we met him. We were busy students and new parents at the time, but the Church created an opportunity for us to love and be loved by

this man who would not have otherwise been in our social circles.

Not only do these relationships help us to expand our understanding of and love for all of God’s children, but they also free us from the prisons of self-absorption, cultural ignorance, and prejudice. Simply put, church participation helps us to love and serve as the Savior would have us do.

Several of our most beloved friends who grew up attending church have stepped away from the Church as adults. They continue to be generous and true friends today; we love them unconditionally and hope that they’ll always feel our love, regardless of their religious affiliation. They have told us that what they most miss about the Church is the way it creates a loving community. In those conversations, we have come to realize that church community is so effective because its roots live in something bigger than civic community: the love, Spirit, and priesthood power of God.

A Place to Serve and Be Served

Knowing others through church has also made our children aware of the needs of those around them, including the loneliness of our widowed neighbor. One evening when both of us were gone for work, our children had our neighbor over for dinner. Our neighbor enjoyed the dinner, and we as parents felt grateful for a church that had instilled in our children empathy and a desire to serve others.

In an 1888 letter to a Church publication, British Church member Marion E. Scoles wrote, “There is a luxury above all others in this world, and it is the exquisite luxury of doing good to our fellow creatures.”³

Of all that we want to offer our children as parents, we believe raising them in a church that provides this “exquisite luxury” is the best legacy we can give.

But the great blessing of Church service is that it goes both ways. Since birth, both of us have been recipients of Church members’ service. When I (Kate) was six weeks old, my alcoholic father disappeared just two days before we were scheduled to move. In one day, our home



and visiting teachers swooped in and moved my mother and me into a new apartment, where they even hung our art and placed my mother's toothbrush in the exact place it had been in the old apartment.

I (Sam) was a rebellious teenager and didn't believe in God, but the men in my ward took me under their wing and taught me to be a responsible adult. They helped me find jobs and transportation. Their loving parental influence opened my heart to the influence of the Spirit.

Thanks to the generosity of Church members—single, married, divorced, widowed, male, and female—we have been edified and strengthened throughout our lives, never having to face surgeries, moves, or other hardships alone.

Forgiveness at Church

Working with others isn't always easy. Our collaborations with other members can be pleasant, even joyful, but sometimes, serving with others can be challenging. As Elder D. Todd Christofferson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles observed: "All of us are imperfect; we may offend and be offended. We often test one another with our personal idiosyncrasies."⁴

In these situations, the Spirit can show us how to turn a challenging situation into a growth opportunity. Usually, the Lord softens our hearts and helps us find common ground, but when relationships remain difficult, He can help us develop patience or charity (see Moroni 7:44–48; 1 Corinthians 13).

The Blessings of Priesthood Ordinances

Church attendance also allows us to witness and participate in priesthood ordinances that further bind us together as a community of Saints. Attending baptisms, partaking of the sacrament together, witnessing baby blessings—all unify us as we feel the Spirit and a shared gratitude for the priesthood.

Recently, we performed temple sealings with members of our ward. One of the sealing ceremonies, wherein a child was sealed to

his parents, was especially sacred. While he represented the deceased parents, a much older man from our neighborhood represented the child. We all smiled together as the generations were reversed. As the words of the ceremony were pronounced, we all felt the significance of an earnest and hopeful son being bound to his parents for eternity, an experience none of us is likely to forget.

When the young women in our ward left their seats to support June, they showed love to her and to God. They knew how to serve her because they had participated with her in church. The church setting also brought them the Spirit, who gave them the idea and the courage to stand.

Christ promised that when we, as His disciples, assemble ourselves together, He will pour out His Spirit upon us (see Doctrine and Covenants 44:2). As He does so, and as we follow His commandment to care for each other (see Doctrine and Covenants 44:6), our congregations become gifts from the Lord that draw us closer to each other and to Him. ■

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NOTES

1. Text from "June" to Kate Holbrook, Aug. 21, 2019.
2. Reyna I. Aburto, "With One Accord," *Ensign*, May 2018, 78.
3. Marion E. Scoles, "Letter to the *Exponent*, circa December 1888," in Jill Mulvay Derr, Carol Cornwall Madsen, Kate Holbrook, and Matthew J. Grow, eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women's History* (2016), 558.
4. D. Todd Christofferson, "Why the Church," *Ensign*, Nov. 2015, 109.