

Living the Gospel

ALONE IN YOUR FAMILY

By Megan Armknecht

When Luis Lopez Rodriguez of Ecuador decided to be baptized, his mother fought the idea. “Initially, the situation was quite complicated. She thought I was being forced to join the Church.” Luis was eventually baptized but knew he would be living the gospel alone in his family.

Like Luis, many members of the Church—particularly youth and young adults—do not come from families where everyone belongs to the Church. Sometimes children join but parents do not. Other times one spouse is an active member of the Church while the other has different religious beliefs. A couple could marry in the temple, yet one spouse could drift away from the Church.

Each family’s situation is unique, but differences in beliefs and practices can strain family relations, says



Dr. Adam Fisher, a psychologist who has worked with LDS Family Services and Brigham Young University Counseling and is now with the Family Institute at Northwestern University.

However, the gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope to *all* families, regardless of individual circumstances, as “happiness in family life is most likely to be achieved when founded upon the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ Gospel principles strengthen every family, no matter the situation. This includes families in which not all are members of the Church—what we sometimes call “part-member families.” Although Latter-day Saints in such families face unique challenges, striving for love, communication, and respect in their families can help them strengthen their testimonies, build friendships, and bring peace into their homes.

Live Together in Love

Love heals and strengthens both members and nonmembers in part-member families. As President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, Second Counselor in the First Presidency, has taught, love is part of the “fabric of the plan of salvation”² as well as the family. When members and nonmembers living in the same family show love through service and kindness, the family becomes more unified.

Some Latter-day Saints in part-member families have family members who support their activity in the Church.

Pamela Suárez Méndez of Mexico and her sister Yuli are the only members in their family, but their other family members are kind and supportive. Love comes easily for their family. “As we’ve learned to see them as God sees them, then we love them even more and they respond with more love,” Pamela said.

However, this is not the case for every family. When Amanda (name has been changed) joined the Church, her father was antagonistic toward any type of religion. “He said that religion was a crutch for the weak,” Amanda said. “It was really hard for me to feel like he loved me, and it was hard for me to honor him when he was so mean about religion.”

To “love one another” (John 13:34) is not always the easiest commandment to follow. Sometimes, even when a member of the Church reaches out in love to his or her nonmember family members, there will still be anger or indifference on their part. In these cases, it is vital to obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit to know how to handle individual situations and continue in faith.

Learn to Communicate

In addition to love, effective communication can strengthen part-member families. When Scarlett Bradley of Florida started investigating the Church, her family was concerned. However, through communication—sharing and listening to each other’s thoughts and feelings—Scarlett and her family have grown together in love and respect for each other. “The peace and love that is in my home comes from the open dialogues we have,” she said. Her family members have regard for one another’s perspectives.

Dr. Fisher also stressed the importance of communication. “Communication seems like a simple answer, but it is crucial.” He has noticed that in counseling, family members “sometimes use God or the Church in order to win an argument.” In contrast, couples and families can communicate with kindness and “care for each other like good friends” rather than see each other as enemies. “It is challenging but possible—and even rewarding—for two adults in a family to remain close while holding different beliefs.”



Respect Each Other's Agency

Members should respect the agency of others in their families, particularly in relation to attitudes about the gospel. Pamela has found that the best she can do is to “always respect my family members’ beliefs. We cannot ask others for respect if we are not willing to give it.”

It can be even more difficult if family members do not respect the Church member’s agency and are hostile about the member going to church, meeting with other members, or keeping commandments.

For Amanda, learning to respect her father’s agency and to be patient with his anger toward her choices took time. One day in institute, the class was talking about charity. “As we were talking, it hit me,” she said. “I realized that he really loved me, just because I’m his daughter.” This realization helped her learn to respect her dad, even if he didn’t respect her decisions about the Church. “I recognized that we’re all here on earth to make our own choices—he made different decisions than me, and I made different decisions than him. I can still love him, and he can still love me.”

Hold On to Your Testimony

Since family support can be mixed, it is important for Latter-day Saints in part-member families to develop their own testimonies and live the gospel faithfully, even if no one else urges them to.

Laura Rytting of Utah grew up in a part-member family in New Jersey, USA. Her mother was a convert to the Church, but her father was never baptized. Laura learned the importance of living the gospel on her own. “My seminary experience was all up to me,” she said. She had an inner drive that helped her make friends, attend activities, and develop her own testimony.

Living your testimony can help show family members the strength of your convictions and your determination to follow Jesus Christ. For example, Luis said that the way he lives his life shows his mother that Latter-day Saints are kind people. “Knowing that I’m an example to her motivates me to live the gospel in the best possible way I can.”

Building Friendships

Other members of the Church can also help strengthen part-member families through friendship and good examples. Amanda remembered how seeing other families treat their children with kindness at Church meetings showed her that there was a different way to live and that a future home that was happy and loving could become a reality for her.

However, the actions of other Church members can also be troubling if the people in a part-member family feel like a burden or a project. Rachel (name has been changed) of Utah married a nonmember. She explained that sometimes her family has felt like a project for other members. On the other hand, she said that her family has benefitted from the genuine friendship of home teachers who came to repair roofs and just talk about life.

“It’s easier to build a relationship with someone who is friendly without being pushy,” Rachel said. “We should just treat each other as people by helping someone who is in need of help, being a friend, cheering someone up, or leaving a kind note.”

Members can and should include part-member families in ward activities and social circles without forcing nonmembers to take part in these activities. Home and visiting teachers, bishops, and other ward members can support members and nonmembers in part-member families by including them in neighborhood parties, by giving members rides to church and other activities, and by just being friends.

When ward members show part-member families love, hearts can soften and strong relationships can form, regardless of whether or not the nonmembers of the part-member families join the Church.

Conclusion

Part-member families come in all shapes, sizes, and situations. Each family’s circumstance—like each family—is unique. It is essential for Church members in part-member families to follow the guidance of the Holy Ghost to know how best to support their families and stay strong in the gospel. Living the gospel takes



courage. As Pamela said, “We can be courageous in our testimony, in our words, in our actions, and in our faith. This will give us power to be the instruments in the hands of our Heavenly Father to bless our families.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ can provide hope for any family. Although there are no picture-perfect families in the Church (as every family has its challenges), the Church still strives for the ideal.³

We should take hope in the knowledge that God is aware of each family’s situation. We are all part of His family, and He has provided a plan for all of us to return to Him. Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, families can find joy, peace, and healing. Through the challenges, joys, and relationships in families, we learn how to become better disciples of Christ and how to return to live with God again.

“Our family is a precious gift from Heavenly Father,” said Scarlett. “We are to learn vital lessons from them and the experiences we have with them. As we keep an eternal perspective focused on Jesus Christ, blessings will be poured out on our families.” ■

The author lives in New Jersey, USA.

NOTES

1. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2010, 129.
2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “In Praise of Those Who Save,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 80.
3. See Neil L. Andersen, “Whoso Receiveth Them, Receiveth Me,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 49–52.

DO’S AND DON’TS

- **Don’t** treat part-member families as projects.
- **Do** be a friend.
- **Don’t** be afraid to talk directly to the family member who is not a Church member. In most cases they still want friendship and don’t want to argue about the Church.
- **Do** respect boundaries and agency.
- **Don’t** gossip.
- **Do** include all of the family in planning ordinances.
- **Don’t** ever suggest that an inactive spouse is a bad influence on the family.
- **Do** invite part-member families to participate, with no strings attached, in things that they may be interested in, such as campouts, sporting activities, and so on.