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# WHAT'S IT LIKE //////////////////////////////////// TO BE A BRAND NEW CONVERT?

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*You can help new members by understanding what they are going through.*

If you grow up in the Church, churchy things become pretty normal. You get used to the regularity of the meetings, the building you attend, the kind of clothes people wear at church. Things like giving talks in sacrament meeting, paying tithing and fast offerings, and fasting once a month are just a part of life. Living the Word of Wisdom, accepting callings to serve, and living the law of chastity are all part of what you learn to do.

But for converts, it can be a big adjustment trying to take it all in. Certainly, gaining a testimony of gospel truths is the first step to membership in Christ's Church. But having a testimony doesn't mean the transition to living life as a member of the Church is easy.

## The Church Can Seem Very Different

Take me for example. I had LDS friends since I was 13, and I eventually joined the Church when I was 19. But despite learning a lot about Church culture over those years, I had a hard transition. To me, the Church culture and practices were so different that they seemed kind of weird.

I grew up in a church that in many ways is quite unlike the one you know or are coming to know. At church the ministers and choir wore robes similar to high school graduation robes. During worship service—their equivalent of sacrament meeting—the ministers gave sermons and did all the talking. Every Sunday we all repeated the Lord's Prayer in unison and always sang the hymn "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow." Babies were baptized by having water sprinkled on their heads, but confirmation happened at around 14 years old.



We used grape juice instead of water for the sacrament, and high school kids attended Sunday School with the adults in a class that talked about current issues in society.

Even our building was different from the LDS buildings I had visited. We had a large chapel modeled after Christian churches in Europe, with a high peaked roof and tall, stained-glass windows. There was a cross in the choir loft. A beautiful, tall bell tower stood out front. I loved ringing that bell after church services. It was heavy enough that it could lift a small child off the ground as the rope went up and down.

Our customs and social beliefs were different too. We were taught that it was OK to drink alcohol or smoke. Having a boyfriend or girlfriend as a teenager was OK. In fact, we were taught that you could even have sexual relations before marriage as long as you believed you were in love. We never talked about having a testimony. The first time I saw a fast and testimony meeting—wow! I couldn't believe how odd that seemed. No one ever stood to share their beliefs like that in my church.

Coming to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wasn't just about learning new doctrines, such as the

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premortal life and baptism for the dead; it was a change in culture and lifestyle and expectations. Resolving those differences was a hard road to walk.

The first six months after my baptism were really hard. I almost didn't make it. Everything was so different, especially because I was attending church without my family. I still struggled with certain doctrinal points, as well as feelings of being estranged from my past.

Fortunately, my friends in the Church were patient, kind, and constant. They took me to activities, invited me to their homes for dinner and family home evening, and prayed with me. That made a huge difference not just in my joining the Church but also in my staying active and finding strength when my testimony wavered. I owe a lot to them for helping me figure things out.

In the following stories, two young members share their own experiences of joining the Church and how they found the strength to make it. As you read their experiences, think about what you could do to help a new convert or someone returning to activity find the strength to adapt socially and culturally and to grow spiritually.

### Waiting Years to Be Baptized

When I was in high school, I decided to join the Church after meeting the missionaries at English classes and studying with them. My parents reacted pretty badly when I told them I wanted to be baptized. They didn't know a whole lot about the Church, and they were afraid I would be caught up in something dangerous. They thought that the Church would get in the way of my education and that



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## WHAT CONVERTS FACE

Here are some of the challenges new converts face. How might your friendship help them face their challenges?

1. Struggling to understand new doctrine.
2. Choosing different media, music, movies, and books.
3. Understanding scripture language.
4. Coping with lack of acceptance from non-LDS family and friends.
5. Wearing different clothing.
6. Dedicating the time to attend church and seminary.
7. Learning new practices and customs in the worship services.
8. Having to change habits, language, and ways of thinking.
9. Adapting to LDS social culture.
10. Learning the LDS-specific meanings of terms, like *gospel*, *apostasy*, and *restoration*.

because of all the rules, I wouldn't be able to enjoy life. They wouldn't let me get baptized for two and a half years.

I was tested right from the start. In the years before I could be baptized, I prayed over and over again for strength and the necessary faith to keep believing. I couldn't attend church or associate with members or missionaries. I had to build my faith and my testimony with prayer, scripture reading, and the words of modern prophets—by myself. I missed out on a lot of interesting programs and fun activities.

When I moved to Rome for college, my bishop became a true friend who stood by me when my parents were really angry. He taught me that it was essential to love my parents regardless.

When I finally got baptized, many ward members came and supported me. I joined the choir and made a lot of friends there. Their friendship and kindness made me feel at home.

When we are true to the teachings of Jesus Christ and follow His example in loving and caring for others, recent converts and investigators will see that we don't just talk the talk, we walk the walk.

*Ottavio Caruso is from Italy and is currently serving a full-time mission.*

## Not Fitting In

I joined the Church when I was 13 years old. I had a testimony of the gospel, yet I had a nagging feeling that I didn't quite fit in at church. Everyone else knew the songs and the scripture stories; I didn't. Everyone else had memories of Primary activities or family home evening lessons; I'd never done either of those things.

But beyond that, everyone seemed to have the same interests and

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opinions—sometimes very strong opinions that were the opposite of mine—about everything from movies and politics to the interpretation of certain scriptures. I would look around at all of the nodding heads and think, “You’re nice people and I am a nice person. But we are just too different. I don’t belong here.”

I struggled with those feelings for several years. Then I recalled and reread the story from Luke 19 about Zacchaeus. Because he was a publican, he was unpopular and considered a sinner. But when Jesus passed through his city, Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see over the crowd. He didn’t care what others thought of him. It was this act of climbing the tree—separating himself from the

crowd—that enabled him to have a very beautiful and personal experience with the Savior. As I read, I recognized that my feelings of being an outsider were not coming from Christ. Jesus was inclusive and forgiving. He actively sought those who were judged and cast aside—those who seemed different.

I can’t say I’ve never felt out of place again. I have. But I’ve learned that the things that make me different—the way I look, the way others look at me, the things I’m passionate about, the way I think about the world—these are not reasons to fall away. These are the reasons the Church needs all of us, with all our different talents, strengths, and perspectives. ■

*Elaine Vickers lives in Utah, USA.*

## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

### Things to Ponder

- What kinds of changes make it hard for some people to join the Church?
- How might your friendship help someone come back to or stay strong in the Church?

### Things You Might Do

- Write down a list of challenges converts often have to overcome and set goals for how you can help them.
- Invite a recent convert or a less-active friend to help you run an activity for your class or quorum.
- Share your experiences at church, at home, or online.