
Single in a Family Church

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Unmarried Latter-day Saints share feelings about fitting in.

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"I gave a talk in church last week and reminded everybody that the gospel of Jesus Christ isn't five kids and a station wagon," Eileen recalls. "Sometimes in testimony meeting, I feel like saying, 'I don't have a husband who loves me, and I don't have any kids, and I still have a testimony!'"

The words carry deep feeling. They express the sentiments of many **members** of the Church who have never married and often feel left out because they are not one-half of a married couple. Thoroughly committed to living the saving doctrines taught by the Church, they still may not feel completely at home simply because so many programs and activities are oriented toward couples and their children.

What follows is based on a discussion with a group of **single** Latter-day Saints living in Calgary, Alberta. Their observations help define the problems that exist for **members** of the Church who have never married; they also suggest some solutions.

Among the Calgary group: Eileen, a counselor-resource teacher in local schools; Neil, an elementary schoolteacher-librarian; Leslie, a teacher-librarian and school language skills specialist; Roxanne, a music instructor at a local college; David, a marketing executive for a large oil company; Ross, an employee of a local dry cleaner; and Debbie, a computer operator and secretary.

The Situation

Eileen: "You know, I'm happy in this life in every respect. But I'm reminded of what I'm not when I go to church. And it makes going to church hard."

Most never-married **members** can remember when a General Authority speaking in conference, or a speaker in a local meeting, took pains to speak to **singles**. But talks and lessons frequently seem to include them as an afterthought. As for activities, Eileen says that she is often more comfortable in social situations with nonmembers, where she is not part of a category—just a **member** of the group.

For some **unmarried members**, the emphasis on families in the Church can make "single adult" seem like a lesser category. And married individuals may easily contribute to **single members'** feelings by their attitudes. **Single** Latter-day Saints say their unwedded state is viewed by others as a problem they could solve for themselves—if only they would. These feelings are especially difficult to handle for those who have never had an opportunity to marry.

Pressure to Marry

David: "There are those who feel that until you're married, you're not right. They want to fix you. It's like a Raggedy Ann doll with an eye gone; they feel this compulsion to put the eye in—and

they don't necessarily care if the eye matches!"

For **unmarried members**, it can seem that family and friends are more concerned about changing **singles'** unwedded status than about helping them find happiness. When an **unmarried member** doesn't see the prospect of a loving marriage with someone who shares a desire to live the gospel, the pressure from family and associates can be especially difficult to bear.

"If you go out to a show a couple of times (with a friend of the opposite sex), you don't tell anyone," David says.

"People make assumptions," Debbie comments. "If a couple is seeing each other, and if they don't care what people say, they may sit together more than twice. But I've seen the pressures ruin more than one good friendship."

"You look for someone who's right," David continues. "It's not just a matter of two righteous people getting together. I expect to have to work at it, but I also recognize that before I kneel across the altar with someone, I want to be sure this is the one I want to spend eternity with."

Eileen reflects that some **single members** may be "a little too selective ... a little too fussy" in choosing a mate. Still, there are valid reasons why some may not marry. "I've always felt there are a certain number of women in the Church who are going to be **single** in this life; the numbers clearly show that," she comments. "But what haunts me is whether I'm going to have to account sometime for my singleness and be found short because I didn't do something that I should have."

In this frame of mind, **single members** can be vulnerable to insensitive comments. After there were several engagements in a ward she was attending, Debbie recalls, someone asked her jovially when she and the man she was dating were going to get "the engagement bug." It hurt, because she had just broken up with him.

Strength in Association

*Leslie: "**Single** people need to associate with other **single** people—not to marry them, necessarily, but just to be with people who are in the same kind of situation."*

There is strength in numbers, Leslie points out—strength of a kind married **members** often take for granted. Many married Latter-day Saints have spouses to encourage them in Church activity and children to whom they want to leave a gospel legacy. But **members** who have not married must have strong self-motivation. In this situation, LDS friends can be important sources of support and encouragement.

Members of the Calgary group agree that because of the widely varying interests in any group of people, a variety of activities—perhaps with a variety of prices—must be available for **single members**.

"You can have a lot of fun spending very little money. Get a video, have a potluck dinner, and it costs almost nothing," Neil says.

David replies: "But if we want to go to the philharmonic, let's have the option."

Neil points out that there is a self-motivated group of **single** Latter-day Saints in the Calgary area who organize activities on their own—progressive dinners, outings to Waterton National Park, and the like. But there are **single members** on the periphery—sometimes by choice—who can easily be overlooked. “It’s absolutely vital to have Church activities to draw these people in,” Neil comments.

Members of the Calgary group feel that periodic dances alone are not the answer. Several express concern that some of their **unmarried** LDS friends are fulfilling social needs in places that are not conducive to spirituality.

Eileen, who is deeply involved in planning **single** adult activities, points out some of the problems: small budgets, difficulty in communicating with **singles** scattered through many stakes and wards, difficulty in finding activities that interest **members** of many different ages.

How can leaders be sure activities are planned that will meet the needs of *all* their **members**? Suggested approaches include surveying **single members** about their preferences, inquiring about their interests through home and visiting teachers, and encouraging small-group activities among those with common interests.

Ross says that his opportunity to make LDS friends would be quite limited were it not for the **singles** ward he attends. So, too, might his opportunity to serve. He believes that in a family ward in a big city, where there is a large LDS population, he probably wouldn’t have been called to the elders quorum presidency—a calling that has blessed his life.

Callings are a concern for most **single** Latter-day Saints. They commonly feel that in family wards, positions of major responsibility are reserved for married **members**; they feel that it is as though **unmarried members** are not thought mature enough to handle them.

Individual Responsibility

*Roxanne: “Leaders can’t make every program in the Church fit everyone at once. I think **single members** should be strong enough and smart enough on their own to get blessings from the Church.”*

Like many other **single members**, Roxanne would like to feel the assurance that she is a worthwhile person regardless of her marital status. She feels no responsibility to accept just any proposal of marriage in order to fit into the “married” category.

Nor does she feel, as some do, that it is necessarily a role of the Church to help her find a mate. “I think people often say, ‘Here I am, Church, take care of me.’ ” But, she adds, “it’s up to the individual to get as much as possible out of every program.” When one attends an activity, “if he’s not there, or she’s not there, that’s not the Church’s fault.”

There are a number of things that **unmarried members** can and should do for themselves in order to feel more at home in the Church, **members** of the Calgary group say. There are also some things that ward leaders and other individuals can do to help **single members** feel comfortable in family wards.

“The crux of the matter is attitude,” Debbie says. **Single members** need to avoid the “poor little

me” syndrome. And married **members** must do two things—avoid pity (which can be a peculiar kind of condescension) for those who are **unmarried** and avoid the prejudice that there is something wrong with adult Latter-day Saints who are **single**.

“For **singles**, it’s easy to sit around and say, ‘Woe is me, why don’t they do this or that for us?’ ” Eileen says. “But I think we should both make our needs known and make positive suggestions.” Debbie recalls one group of **single** women who informed their ward Relief Society president that they were getting little from consistently family-oriented lessons. The women requested their own class—and with their bishop’s approval, it was begun.

On the other hand, **single** Latter-day Saints can also build bridges to married **members**. David has had some success with inviting ward families to his home for lunch or Sunday dinner. As a home teacher, he visits a family with four small children; he gave their mother a day off by taking the children to the zoo. “She thought that was great,” he says.

“I would suspect,” Roxanne says, “that there are plenty of housebound wives who would love to strike up a conversation with another woman who could talk about something new, or teach them something new.” The **single** sister might need to take the first step in establishing such a friendship, but both would benefit.

Many parents seem to think that **members** who have not married don’t want to be around children, Eileen comments. But “**single** people aren’t all the same.” Some **singles** may deal with other people’s children all week long and relish the thought of not seeing youngsters on weekends. On the other hand, “I’ve got a friend, a businesswoman who works in an office, who just craves being around little children,” Eileen explains. “I’d love to have contact with a few kids, but I never get the opportunity. Maybe I need to ask.”

There are little touches priesthood and Relief Society leaders can apply in family wards that **single members** would probably appreciate. One of the most important is to ensure that the spiritual, emotional, and temporal needs of **single members** occupy as high a priority as those of young people and families.

Leaders might avoid orienting activities solely toward couples. One ward in which she lived, Debbie says, did not provide tickets for events on a per-couple basis; the tickets were obtained individually. Ward activities—a western night with square dancing, for example—did not shut out those who were not paired off with someone. Many wards plan a “Family Fun Night” or a “Family Picnic”; instead, these might be promoted as the “Ward Fun Night” or “Ward Picnic,” **single members** suggest.

“I think that everyone who speaks in a family ward ought to consider their audience—that a third of the people in the congregation are likely to be **single**—or are going to be **single**,” Eileen comments. Often, speakers say, “I want to talk to the mothers and fathers,” or “here’s a story for the children.” This done, she explains, “it’s like they’ve covered all the bases.” Gospel principles apply equally to everyone. Saints who do not have the opportunity to share love with a spouse are just as obligated as any other **member** to love their neighbor, speak no ill, pay tithes and offerings, and seek the Spirit through scripture study.

But the responsibility for finding the truth in talks and lessons falls on **unmarried** hearers as well. “We can take lessons (on family relations) and apply them to interpersonal relations, whether

we're talking about a roommate, a friend, or our own parents," Debbie reflects. "We have to say, 'How can I apply it to me?'—likening the scriptures unto us."

This idea—that the gospel applies to all of our Heavenly Father's *individual* children—is a key to helping **single members** feel at home in the Church.

Marriage, Leslie emphasizes, is not the only criterion of obedience. **Members** who are married ought not to weigh in the balance those who have not married and find them somehow wanting. After all, she says, "when it comes down to it, we're judged as individuals."

"It would be nice if people could deal with me as an individual, as a spirit who has something to contribute and has something of value," David says.

David reflects on the emphasis the Lord placed on seeking out the individual and on the Savior's willingness to spare no effort in bringing every sheep into the fold. Latter-day Saints who have not married, he says, would like to feel that they are as important to other Church **members** as they are to the Savior—regardless of marital status. "You like to be loved as the son or daughter of your Heavenly Father that you are."

*Gospel topic: **single members***

[photo] Photography by Jed A. Clark