
Finding Balance in Life as a Single

The Church and Single Latter-day Saints

The gospel offers single members great opportunities, says Elder Marion D. Hanks of the Presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy

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Elder Marion D. Hanks of the Presidency of the First Quorum of the Seventy and Executive Director of the Melchizedek Priesthood Department has long been associated with Church programs and activities for single members. The *Ensign* spoke with him to learn more about how these programs and activities can serve the needs of single Latter-day Saints.

Ensign: How do Church programs serve the needs of single members?

Elder Hanks: The purpose of God's church is to serve as His institutional agent in blessing His children. It accomplishes that purpose for its participating members, including single members, who are as important to our Heavenly Father as any other member. Their spiritual progress and temporal well-being are of great importance to the Lord and to leaders in His church.

Ensign: We live in a time of rapid growth for the Church. How do Church leaders in Salt Lake City keep up with the needs of unmarried members in a worldwide organization?

Elder Hanks: All of the General Authorities and Church auxiliary leaders are concerned about the needs of every member and have many opportunities to learn about them. When we visit stake conferences each week, one of the subjects most commonly discussed is the status of single members. We receive frequent reports on the activities and needs of these members through Area Presidencies and regional representatives. Single adult members have the opportunity to make their needs known through their local leaders. In response to requests by Church leaders for more information about single Latter-day Saints, demographic studies have been done to show us where these single adult members are and what some of their needs are. The studies were done with an eye to the status of members worldwide. We have also solicited direct responses from both priesthood leaders and single adults about how Church programs can serve and strengthen them more effectively.

Ensign: What can single members do to help themselves fully enjoy gospel blessings?

Elder Hanks: Perhaps the focus should be less on "What is the Church doing for us?" and more on "What can we do for others?" The Church offers the greatest opportunity known for people to get outside themselves and serve others. The happiest people in the Church, single or married, are those who are reaching beyond themselves in service to their fellowmen.

Recently, I heard an interesting comment from a widow who serves as a liaison between leaders and single parents in her stake. She reflected on her family's feelings about the absence of their husband and father who had lost his life in a recent accident. "He was a wonderful husband and father," she said, "and we miss so greatly his love and his taking care of us. But you know," she said, "I think we miss even more not having him to love and take care of."

There is growth in service that can come to members of any age and any condition. Even older members whose physical activities may now be restricted can find joy in accepting responsibility for helping others. It may only be by telephone, or an encouraging note, but they will feel needed, and they will bless the lives of others.

Ensign: Many members who long for the blessings of marriage and family life look to the Church to help supply those blessings. Is this a realistic expectation?

Elder Hanks: Many times those desired blessings are found through Church activities and through service to others in the gospel. We are pleased when Church activities and programs have such happy consequences. But although the program of the Lord is designed to enable every individual to enjoy maximum blessings, the Church as an institution must not be expected to meet every member's every personal need. We as leaders—and all of us as members—are obligated to care about people and to love them. While we cannot fulfill all their earthly desires, we can be interested, loving, caring brothers and sisters.

It is gratifying when leaders learn that Church-sponsored social activities have afforded the opportunity for some single members to begin wholesome relationships that blossom into temple marriage. But we should remember that socials are not the only place this can happen. Some of the best potential marriage partners are found quietly serving others in both Church and community projects. The love they develop through this service would be a blessing in any relationship. Those who commit themselves to serving others may well find the partner they are seeking through a service opportunity.

In their relationship with Heavenly Father, members can seek and receive help in reaching personal goals. We hope no one will overlook that vital source of help.

Ensign: Some who have not had the opportunity, after many years, to marry a faithful Latter-day Saint wonder whether it would be better to forgo marriage entirely or to marry a good, moral non-Latter-day Saint in order to enjoy the blessings of family life here on earth.

Elder Hanks: That is not a question that can be answered on a general basis, and essentially it is not a question that one person can answer for another. It must be handled in counsel with our Heavenly Father, and the answer must be sought through the Spirit. There are grave risks, of course, that eternal blessings may not be obtained if a nonmember spouse never develops an interest in the gospel.

But there can be missionary potential in the situation, too. Many men and women who have been converted through a faithful spouse bear testimony of their deep gratitude for a husband or wife, in-laws, and other loved ones who cared enough to share the gospel with them.

Some may never have an opportunity to marry in this life. However, the Lord's prophets have taught us that all that is beautiful and lovely about eternal partnership and family life will be available sometime, and with joy we cannot imagine here, to those individuals who endure to the end in Christlike living.

Ensign: Some singles have suggested that the Church establish or recommend some sort of social network—perhaps a pen-pal club—through which unmarried members can come to know other Latter-day Saints who could be potential marriage partners. Is there a problem with this idea?

Elder Hanks: The difficulty is that there is no way to effectively monitor those who could abuse such a system. The Church cannot be responsible for the conduct of every individual who might take advantage of it under false pretenses. Many members already realize that they must exercise great care in their social contacts. There have been reports of some tragic instances that have occurred.

Ensign: The Church has recently announced changes in the organizational requirements for singles wards. How will these changes better serve the needs of members?

Elder Hanks: It is to be emphasized that these changes came by direct instruction from the First Presidency, and they signal that the Church is concerned at the highest level about the needs of single members. This signal is helpful because the First Presidency has authorized the establishment of appropriate Church units based upon meeting needs of individuals. Local Church leaders now have more flexibility in trying to help all receive the blessings of full activity in the Church.

At the same time, we should not forget that fewer than 10 percent of the Church's single members are served by single or student wards or branches. The rest live in conventional family wards or branches. Here again, Church guidelines for single adult programs give leaders flexibility to better meet their needs and interests while keeping them close to the Church.

Ensign: How will the new flexibility in the guidelines on singles units benefit single members?

Elder Hanks: Our ongoing and continuing concern is to serve the needs of *all* single adults. The creation of a singles unit is only one option available to stake leaders in meeting those needs. Now, when they judge it important to recommend the creation of a singles unit, it can be done with fewer numbers than before.

There are other ways in which this flexibility benefits members, with or without singles units in their areas. Church guidelines now allow region, multiregion, and general task committees to plan social and service activities for single adults. And while the guidelines place single Latter-day Saints in two general age groups—Young Single Adults and Single Adults—local leaders have had the option for some time of subdividing these into narrower age groups if by so doing they can better meet the needs of those involved.

Ensign: Where local leaders choose to recommend the option of creating a singles unit, what are some of the benefits of those units?

Elder Hanks: Studies have shown that the statistical probability of temple marriage increases significantly where members are actively involved in a singles unit. The probability is even higher in stakes that have student wards. However, these statistics cannot be attributed only to the presence of a singles ward; there are many other factors involved. But singles units do provide opportunities for members to meet, teach, worship, and serve together, thus enhancing acquaintances beyond a social or party setting.

In addition, we know that single Latter-day Saints help strengthen each other when they worship and serve together. Singles units also have great missionary potential. One stake reported that its single adult ward accounted for a third of its total stake missionary baptisms. And, as a result, many members of single adult wards are motivated to serve full-time missions—including some

who might not have otherwise served.

The members of a single adult unit can be a valuable service resource as well. Projects carried out by some units have provided much-appreciated service to their own communities and have given a boost to the Church's missionary effort at the same time.

It must also be remembered, however, that many members of the Church who are not married do not wish to be singled out for special attention. No pressure should ever be exerted to push individuals into singles units if they prefer to remain in a conventional ward.

Ensign: What are some other things local leaders can do to benefit single adult members?

Elder Hanks: Four critical things come to mind that leaders should be doing for unmarried Latter-day Saints, regardless of whether these members attend a singles unit.

First, it's important to locate all members in the boundaries of their ward or stake and become acquainted with their individual circumstances.

Second, they can seek to help single adult members to increase in spiritual strength, to gain stronger testimonies. One of the ways to do this is to be sure single members are assigned faithful, strong home teachers and visiting teachers who care about them as individuals and who bring the influence of the Spirit into their homes. Where it seems advisable, a wife may be assigned as a companion to her husband in visiting single sisters.

Third, bishops and stake presidents can involve single members in opportunities for leadership and service. Single members can make valuable contributions in a wide variety of callings in any Church unit. We must give them the opportunity to function in those callings, just as we do any other member.

Fourth, leaders can be sure there is a continuing dialogue with single adult members. Interviewing is only one way this can be done; there should be many other opportunities to get to know individuals. If these opportunities don't arise naturally, leaders ought to make them.

Generally, Relief Society leaders can do a better job than brethren at meeting the needs of single adult sisters. A ward Relief Society leader ought to know every unmarried woman in her ward, including single mothers. She ought to know their situations and their needs.

Ensign: With so many people to keep track of, how can a bishop or stake president be sure the needs of single adult members are being met?

Elder Hanks: One way is to learn to properly use the quarterly Supplemental Report form, which contains much valuable help. It is designed to assist leaders to track members' spiritual progress. A stake president can use it to learn whether individual members are being ministered to in the wards as they should be. A bishop can use it to help set goals for supporting the spiritual growth of members, in families or not.

Ensign: Sometimes single members are troubled by low self-esteem. How can the gospel help them overcome these feelings?

Elder Hanks: The relationships we have with ourselves and with others are entwined with our relationship with our Heavenly Father. When we're interested only in making *ourselves* happy, we neglect those other relationships. But when we become interested in serving others, then we feel better about ourselves—and happy and at peace with God.

Section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants, verse 45, tells us that we must love all of God's children, including those in "the household of faith," and that we are to "let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God." [D&C 121:45] If we have a broad understanding of virtue, so that our thoughts are completely right with regard to our fellowmen, then we may be comforted by that confidence in our relationship with our Heavenly Father. That is the most important of all our relationships.

Ensign: What should local leaders do to help single Latter-day Saints achieve their full potential in the gospel?

Elder Hanks: Those who minister to others through the gospel must seek to strengthen people spiritually, to lead them into spiritual experiences. They must help them prepare to receive temple covenants. They should give them the opportunity for leadership experience. And they should help them prepare for lifelong service to the Lord, their family, the Church, and their community.

Each of these guidelines helps people move upward in the eternal perspective. That is what the gospel can do for each of us, whether we are married or not. It can help to bring us to Christ and be perfected in Him.

Gospel topics: single members

[photos] Photography by Steve Bunderson