



# Know Your Neighbor

INVITING ONE ANOTHER INTO OUR HOMES AND HEARTS



The Gift of a Greenhouse

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## *Opening your home, Opening your Heart*

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Greenhouse – *n.* A home that captures the light and warmth of the Son, giving life and energy to all who enter.

Global cooling – *n.* A decrease in the average number of confidants, and in the size of personal inner circles, resulting in the hearts of mankind beginning to wax cold.

In the age of cell phones, e-mail and text messages – literally unlimited, constant communication – we seem to have lost our ability to make friends. We have neatly fenced yards and locks on all our doors but who are we keeping out?

## High or Low

It is quite possible in suburban America to never see or speak to our nearest neighbors – a situation that in an earlier age would have meant that we would have no help bringing in the crops or threshing the wheat or raising our new barn. While most of us no longer need our neighbors' help to sustain the basic necessities of life, when we don't know our neighbor we miss out on life-enriching relationships, and we contribute to the trend of "global cooling" – the world is indeed a cold place with no friends in it.

Several years ago we moved from an urban ward in the New York, New York stake into a suburban ward in the Boston, Massachusetts Stake. Even though we had moved only a few hours north, the wards were remarkably different. In Manhattan, we were among the oldest, and one of the more seasoned couples. In Northborough, we were not only youngish, there were five former stake presidents and ten former bishops in our ward. In New York City, our peers had toddlers. Here, they had teenagers.

I arrived home from church our first Sunday tremendously worried. We had just purchased a home we thought we would live in for decades. I wanted our ward to feel like home, but it didn't. Presumably we had a huge piece of religious turf we could call common ground, but was it enough? We had a decision to make: withdraw and isolate ourselves, or find a way to integrate.

We felt prompted to fast. With fasting came the inspiration to invite members of our new ward into our home for dinner. I bet you can guess the rest of the story. The more we invited people over, the more we felt a part of the ward. The more we felt a sense of community, the more this ward felt like home.

In retrospect, I see that the Lord was preparing me for a calling that I was to receive several months later: the call to serve as the public affairs representative in the Northborough Ward.

As I studied and thought about how to be most effective in this new calling, I realized that our Public Affairs Committee could pursue a low-touch approach – seeking positive press from the local news media by sending press releases about Church events and hoping their coverage would portray the Church in a good light. Or we could pursue a high-touch approach – actively cultivating one-on-one relationships within our communities.

As I pondered the two approaches, and with the experience of building a “greenhouse” for ward members fresh on my mind, the inspiration for “Know Your Neighbor” came. Which was, in its simplest form, a challenge to each member of our ward to invite an individual or family into their home with whom they had something in common other than religion.

Taken at face value, getting to know your neighbor would be quite simple. Yet, as I considered my own actions over the past few years, I realized it was not necessarily easy to implement. Inviting people into my home and heart without having the immediate bond of shared religious beliefs was going to require me to step outside the comfortable cocoon of the church family, to be more open-minded and accepting of people exactly as they are – without any expectation of a missionary opportunity.

One of our family’s first attempts to build a “greenhouse” where we could get to know our neighbor was to host a Christmas party in our home. Invitations were extended to several of our neighbors and the ward members who we home and visit taught. Until that time, I was a master at compartmentalizing my life: colleagues from work in one compartment, church friends in another, neighborhood friends in yet another. I was anxious about tearing down the wall I had built between my secular and spiritual friends.

When people arrived, we handed out strips of red and green paper to children and adults alike, inviting them to write the names of each person that they spoke to on that piece of paper. We then used these strips of paper to form a chain that was used to trim our tree. My friend Danalee was kind enough to help the children assemble Christmas ornaments that included miniature candy canes and small wrapped gifts that we used to teach the children about the spiritual meaning of Christmas symbols. It was a happy, lively evening in which the spirit of Christmas abounded. And with this success now safely tucked into my Christmas stocking, I was a little more confident that different worlds could intersect, and our greenhouse-in-the-making would be the better for it.

At our party, our “neighbors” were people from the street we lived on, but in the larger picture, our neighbors can be anyone from our community or workplace with whom we can find common ground. As you consider getting to know your neighbor, you may want to initiate the following four steps:

**STEP 1: INVITE MEMBERS OF THE WARD FAMILY INTO YOUR UNDER-CONSTRUCTION GREENHOUSE.**

“A good neighbor is a desirable thing.”

—THOMAS JEFFERSON

Make a goal to invite one individual or family from your ward over for a meal, a sweet treat, or a family game each month – an individual or family with whom you have something in common and that you genuinely are interested in getting to know better. Perhaps you teach Relief Society – invite all the Relief Society teachers. Or why not invite all of your children’s primary teachers?

**STEP 2: INVITE “NEIGHBORS” INTO YOUR GREENHOUSES AND HEARTS**

“The ornament of a house is the friends who frequent it.”

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

One place for finding neighbors – those who share our desire to do good – is where our children congregate, whether at school or on the soccer field. One family in particular comes to mind. Their daughter Amy and our daughter Miranda are friends from school. They truly delight in one another’s company. Because of their friendship we made the decision to invite Amy’s entire family over for dinner. This stretched the boundaries of my comfort zone because while we do have the school experience in common, we don’t have religion or culture in common. Amy’s family is from China. But ever so gradually, we are finding our footing as friends, and they recently invited us to a lovely dinner.

Elder Ballard teaches that, “for the most part, our neighbors not of our faith are good, honorable people—every bit as good and honorable as we strive to be. They care about their families, just like we do. They want to make the world a better place, just like we do. They are kind and loving and generous and faithful, just like we seek to be.”

Our associations at school have led to another wonderful, though slightly different, neighborly friendship. When we moved to Massachusetts, we needed to find a new accountant. Our first impulse was to find a qualified accountant among the members of our stake; it felt safe. Then we learned that one of the mothers at our children’s school, who we quite liked, was a well-respected accountant. Because of our commitment to expand our circle outside of the church community, we hired her. Over the past two years she has become a trusted business advisor, and our families have become friends; we recently spent a day at their vacation home with them.

Has it been a little more work for us to include people from outside the church in our circle of friends? Yes, perhaps. But it is also true that it just as much work for them to reach out to teetotalers and Sabbath observers who belong to a church that many describe as a cult. In reaching out they are taking a risk – just as we are. And in the reaching out, we are both inviting one another into our hearts.

In these situations, the common denominator has not been “shall I befriend them because they might join the church?” but rather “when I am interacting with this person do I feel that they are one of ‘the many good people in the world’ Elder Ballard refers to?”

**STEP 3: TEACH YOUR CHILDREN THAT THEY ARE PART OF A VAST COMMUNITY THAT WANTS TO BE GOOD.**

“Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.”  
—J.K. ROWLING, *HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE*

Some ways to help children understand that there are good people all around us, in our church, in other churches, and within our communities and schools might include:

1. Having children draw a simple map of their street, and label each of the houses with the names of the neighbors.
2. Reading the books *And to Think we Thought We'd Never be Friends* (Mary Ann Hoberman, Crown Books) and *Berenstain Bears' New Neighbors* (Stan Berenstain and Jan Berenstain, Random House Books).
3. Having children draw a spider web with people that they know and love on the web. Who have they included? Why are they connected to people? Why are they not?
4. Showing children a picture of a greenhouse. Explain to them that a greenhouse is a building where the sun's incoming rays warm plants and help them to grow. Ask the children to share ideas about how their own home is like a greenhouse for the neighbors.
5. Serving the children pineapple. Share with them why pineapples are grown in greenhouses, and that pineapples are symbols of hospitality.

**STEP 4: REACH OUT ON AN INSTITUTIONAL BASIS.**

“We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together—as members of the same body.”  
—JOHN WINTHROP

I am struck by Ammon's words to King Lamoni: “I desire to dwell among this people for a time; ...and be thy servant.” (Alma 17: 21-24). Ammon didn't approach the King with a group of friends and say “we” (the scout troop or local Relief Society) will guard the King's territory; he offered to work with the King's servants to protect the flocks.

As stakes and wards, when we are planning service activities, let's follow Ammon's lead, serving with others, not on our own.

For example, when Stake President Stan Green learned that the Hare Krishna faith wanted to build a temple in their area, he led the initial outreach effort to Caru Das, President of the Hare Krishna Temple, and helped secure a \$25,000 grant from the LDS foundation, the philanthropic arm of our church. Taking this outreach beyond a friendly face and financial help, young men and women from surrounding stakes and BYU students helped build the temple and prepare the grounds. Importantly, as members of our faith helped make the Hare Krishna dream of a temple a reality, it was no longer just their temple, but ours as well.

In Boston, Massachusetts, when our Area Authority Seventy, Elder Clayton Christensen learned that several board members of Catholic Charities had resigned over the issue of adoption by same-gender couples, he approached Boston's Cardinal O'Malley about nominating members of our church to serve on the board. What would happen if in every stake across the church, members were actively partnering with clergy of other faiths "to defend those values that have made our civilization great," as admonished by President Hinckley.

Recently my 10-year old son asked me how come he and my daughter are the only Mormons in their school (or two-percent of the student body). After explaining that with 2% of the U.S. population being Latter-day Saints, we were accurately represented. I went on to say "There may be only two Mormons, but most of the kids in your school want to be good and do good, just like you do."

Will any of my expanding community circle ever join our church? I don't know. On many levels it doesn't matter. What I do know is that as I fully engage in building a greenhouse that will counter the effects of global cooling, I have begun to love my neighbors in a way I hadn't thought possible.

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## SIDEBAR

### What about the fear?

Though creating a greenhouse and giving the gift of hospitality is the best way to counter global cooling, it is not easy. Each of us has a litany of reasons for not reaching out to our neighbors: we are too busy, too self-sufficient, too transient, and too scared!

#### *Fear of persecution*

A century ago, the Saints circled the wagons to preserve their lives. Today, we close our circles to avoid rejection and pain. There's the neighborhood group we aren't a part of—because we are different. The business parties where we can't get comfortable—because we are different. Maybe it's just easier to focus on our comfortable church associations.

If we stick exclusively with our own, aren't we encouraging global cooling and an eventual ice age in which our hearts freeze and the love of Christ is extinguished?

And, in those relatively few communities where Latter-day Saints are in the majority, a tendency to isolate ourselves will actually be perceived as an elitist, even exclusive, mentality.

### *Fear of outside influences*

In both ancient and modern scripture, the Lord has taught us to flee Babylon and to gather to Zion. Though the time for physically fleeing and gathering has long since past, the mindset of separating ourselves persists.

Of course we are worried about outside influences – the child that takes the Lord's name in vain, or tells a dirty joke – but I promise you that just as we can find bad influences within our church community, we can find good influences outside. President Hinckley teaches, "We must teach our children to be tolerant and friendly toward those not of our faith. We [must] work with those of other religions in the defense of those values which have made our civilization great and our society distinctive."

### *Fear of rejection*

If we are scared of being rejected, that's a good sign. If we didn't care whether or not the people we are reaching out to will receive us, we might want to ask why we are befriending this person in the first place. C.S. Lewis taught: "If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, then we are not giving enough."