



Sisters Abroad

INTERVIEWS FROM THE MORMON WOMEN PROJECT



THE MORMON WOMEN PROJECT

EDITED BY NEYLAN MCBAIN
INTRODUCTION BY SILVIA H. ALLRED
FORMER FIRST COUNSELOR, RELIEF SOCIETY GENERAL PRESIDENCY

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Former First Counselor,
Relief Society General Presidency

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Foreword

At The Mormon Women Project, we believe in the importance of telling Mormon women's stories. As daughters of God paving paths for our way back to an eternal home, we need the models of others to know where to put our own stepping stones. It's hard to be what we can't see. A historical lack of women's public narratives means that our ability to see and emulate the lives of women we admire has been limited to an intimate scope: the stories of our mothers, grandmothers, teachers, or those in our immediate networks who share their personal journeys with us, apart from the glare of public life, fame, or fortune. This dearth of publicly circulated female models is especially pronounced within our church culture, where scripture stories and leader biographies are almost exclusively male. For millennia, the woman's story has been an intimate story, a family story, a private story told in the journals or letters or conversations of housewives and mothers, friends and sisters.

The Mormon Women Project celebrates the stories of Mormon women—domestic, philosophical, action-packed or public—in hopes that by *seeing*, we can more effectively *be*. Through stories, we can eradicate some of the loneliness that comes from identifying in ourselves those characteristics, dreams, or fears we don't see in others. For the women featured in this book—Mormon women

who live outside of the United States—that sense of being separate or apart from others around them is particularly acute, as most of these women have parted from past lives, habits, beliefs, and even family members to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. In seeking examples of who to be, Mormon women living outside of the United States are doubly burdened: not only do they feel the paucity of stories about Mormon women, they even more rarely find a story about a non-American Mormon woman.

When I launched the Mormon Women Project in January of 2010 with eighteen of my own interviews, showing the strength and diversity of our women outside of the Church's dominant American culture was one of my top priorities. Since then, we have interviewed women in twenty-two countries, and these international interviews consistently stun and humble me when I read them for the first time. Swarupa Katuka of India eases the pain of a childless couple by offering them one of her own children; Agnes Twagiramariya of Rwanda works through forgiveness of those who destroyed her family; Siu Man of Hong Kong doesn't let being homebound keep her from serving and loving others. For these women, who may not have the companionship of other women of faith and, instead, have to pave their own paths, it is the Savior to whom they consistently and completely turn to find strength to press forward alone. Their ability to listen to personal revelation and make righteous choices seems to be fine tuned, and loneliness seems to be eased with the friendship of the Spirit.

So maybe the double burden of our sisters abroad is not a burden at all but a blessed challenge to listen more astutely to the Spirit, hone a sense of divine worth, and pursue uniquely personal paths. These are the stories of women who have risen to that challenge.

Neylan McBaine

Salt Lake City, January 2013

Introduction

Silvia H. Allred | Former First Counselor,
Relief Society General Presidency,
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

When I joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at age fifteen in El Salvador, most of the members of the only small branch in San Salvador were women and children. The only Melchizedek Priesthood holders were the full-time missionaries. In addition, there were four or five single young men who held the Aaronic Priesthood.

There were no complete families, and the strength of the branch was the women, who kept the work moving forward with their faithful and diligent service as leaders and teachers in the Relief Society, Primary, Sunday School, Mutual, and later on, as local missionaries.

Although they had very little formal education, those women touched and influenced my life in great manner with their teaching. From them, I learned gospel doctrine, leadership skills, and discipleship. My faith was nourished by their teaching and example.

One such woman was Yolanda, my first Sunday School teacher. She made the scriptures come alive and inspired me to look in the scriptures for stories and examples of faith, devotion, and discipleship. From her I learned to love the scriptures.

Maria and Sylvia also come to mind. Maria was a single mother who earned her living cleaning houses. Maria had not received much schooling, and her daughter Sylvia, at age sixteen, had not been able to finish high school and had to take a job as a clerk in a pharmacy to help sustain the family.

They had been members of the Church for only a couple of years when I met them, but their lives now revolved around the Church. Maria and Sylvia befriended every new investigator and member in the small branch. They attended every meeting and participated in planning and organizing every activity.

Sylvia led the music in every meeting and was learning to play the hymns, which she did when there were no missionaries who could do it. She did it with such enthusiasm and energy that it made me want to learn to lead music and to play some of the hymns too. This skill became very useful when I was a young missionary in other countries where the Church was also in its beginnings.

From Maria and Sylvia I learned that participation and service in the Church bring joy, growth, and purpose to our lives.

I did not realize it at the time, but as I moved around the world and lived in eleven different countries, I have discovered that indeed, for the most part, women are the sustaining force of the Church in the beginning stages. Their abiding faith and testimony is the glue that holds together their small branches and sets the foundation for a thriving and strong stake in the future.

My Latin American perspective on this matter was expanded during my years of service as a member of the Young Women general board and as a counselor in the Relief Society general presidency. During those years, I had the opportunity to visit countless wards and stakes across the world in many different levels of development and maturity. I met and visited the homes of thousands of our most faithful and devoted members, both male and female.

As I listened to their expressions of faith and love for the Lord and His gospel, I felt inspired, strengthened, and uplifted, and these visits are among the experiences I treasure most.

In Italy, I met a Relief Society president who had a remarkable story about her conversion to the Church. When she was a young mother, married to a well-to-do husband, she visited a friend who introduced her to the Book of Mormon and the Church. She felt in her heart that the message was true, but when she shared her feelings with her husband, he forbade her from acting upon those feelings or even talking about them.

This good woman, in secret, began to read the scriptures and to obey the commandments, nourishing her own faith and that of her small children, when the husband was away to work. She did it for thirteen years, until one day, she was impressed to let her husband know what she had been doing. At first, he was very upset and threatened to leave her, but overnight, he agreed to allow her to “live her religion.” She promptly sought the missionaries and got baptized. Her children were not given permission to join the Church until they reached the age of eighteen.

When the time came, one by one, the children got baptized. The boys served honorable missions, and all were married in the temple to faithful members of the Church. She had to wait ten more years to get permission from her husband to receive her own endowment in the temple. She still cannot talk about religion in her home, but she faithfully serves as Relief Society president in her branch. Her children, now with their own families, continue being active members of the Church serving in presidencies and as teachers.

Her husband has not embraced the gospel, but he attended church for the first time to watch the oldest grandson be baptized.

I also learned that member women throughout the world form a very important cadre of faithful disciples for the work of salvation, and that their powerful influence extends beyond their own families, friends, and neighbors. They influence for good their communities and the world.

This book shares some sample stories selected from a collection of interviews of faithful Mormon women from many different countries and cultures, with the hope that they will inspire, strengthen, and uplift the reader.

Each woman has a unique story to tell. Their backgrounds, circumstances, challenges, and opportunities are all different, yet, they share a common thread: their faith in God and their desire to follow the Savior and His teachings.

The purpose of this volume is to help the reader understand that God is no respecter of persons. We are all His children, and He loves and cares for each of us. We all play a very important part in establishing His kingdom. His work is accomplished through small and simple things. Women in the Church are constantly doing many of those small and simple things from which “proceedeth that which is great.”

Coming to Know Him Who Suffered

Galina Goncharova | Moscow, Russia

Interview produced and translated by Marantha Miles
Originally published September 22, 2010

On June 10, 1990, Galina Goncharova became the first member of the Church to be baptized in what was then the Soviet Union. In this interview she describes her baptism, her journey to the Church, and how the gospel has helped her to forgive and given her power to change her relationships with others.

How was it for you to be the first person to be baptized into the Church in Russia? Were you nervous or scared to join a church that was new to you and that came from outside the Soviet Union?

I've contemplated this a lot. I had been attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings, and there my friend gave me the Book of Mormon. I trusted him when I listened to him. I watched him, listened to his story, his description

of his relationship with God. I felt the Spirit the very first time I took the Book of Mormon into my hands. At the AA group meeting he had asked, “Could you stay behind? I want to talk to you about something.” I heard what he had to say, how he felt God, how he would sometimes be close to God, and then sometimes distance himself from God, and how he sometimes was angry with God. I thought, “How can he feel the love of God? Interesting!”

My belief in God had generally been based on two ideas. First, I thought that God exists. My mother had sometimes said, “There is a God, and He sees everything, He knows everything, and He will give.” When I was a little girl, I would lie down in the evening with my sisters to sleep. We would play and argue, and there was no way we were going to sleep. She would say, “Girls! Don’t you dare! Don’t play around at night! God will punish you!” So secondly, I knew that God will punish, and also that He protects in some way, but this protection for me seemed far away.

I began to read Nephi. I was reading the first chapter and came to a verse: “Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty! Thy throne is high in the heavens, and thy power, and goodness, and mercy are over all the inhabitants of the earth; and, because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!” (1 Nephi 1:14) At this moment I really needed God, that God who was living inside me, but whom I didn’t know or understand. I immediately felt the Spirit so strongly, and it was a spirit of love. I cried and cried a long time. I sobbed, and then I read it again. From that very moment, I memorized this verse. The notion that God would not let me perish because He is merciful filled every cell of my body. He loves so much that He wouldn’t allow me to perish, or anyone to perish. And probably thanks to this, the fear left. He created in me courage—the kind I needed in important moments in my life. I had courage when my friend suggested that I go Sunday to the meeting at Leninsky Prospekt.

Could you describe that first church meeting in Moscow? How many people were there? What was it like?

It was the end of 1988. We had come to the place, and there was a policeman standing there. He told me that yes, this was the building. There were six of us at the meeting in an American diplomat's apartment. I felt such a responsibility. But there wasn't any fear that would have normally gripped me, or a suspicion that this was some kind of dangerous cult, or the thought that I was doing something bad. No fear that I would be detained. I think obviously it was the Holy Spirit. I am really grateful to my friend, because he conveyed to me that he really loved the Church. What he did for me—it's simply a miracle. He passed on his spark of faith; he believed in God, he believed in Jesus Christ, he loved Them.

Every Sunday I saw the policeman that stood guard. At subsequent Sunday meetings, I saw that there was a lesson, there was the sacrament. I went to other churches with my friend from work. I noticed many little differences—the subtleties. It's the small things you judge, and I didn't feel comfortable in other churches for various reasons. This confirmed to me that I was where God wanted me to be.

Tell me about your baptismal day.

I wore my own wedding dress: white crepe, silvery like a snowflake, with a flower. There was no baptismal dress in Russia. At that time we didn't yet rent swimming pools or a public bath. So we waited for June. That June, spring came cold and late. I knew a place with a pond we had gone to with the children near where my husband, Sasha, was born. My husband had promised to go with me. He had been sober for six months. My sons and I found joy in this miracle, but it didn't last. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday he was drunk. I didn't know the way to the pond well. I cried and prayed. My son Sasha said to me, "Mama, I will go with you. Don't worry. I know very well how to get there. Everything will be fine." He was fifteen at the time.

We left the house at 5:40 a.m. to make the first train out of Moscow. It had rained all week and was still raining. When we came to the pond, there was a fisherman who sat on one of the banks, but no one else. We began to walk along the shore to look for a place to change our clothes in the bushes. When we came



at a glance

Location: Moscow, Russia

Age: 64

Marital status: widow

Children: two sons, ages 36 and 34

Baptized: June 10, 1990

Occupation: psychologist

Schools attended: Srednaya Technological

Languages spoken at home: Russian

Favorite hymn: "Love at Home"

out onto the banks to pray, we looked up to see the clearest blue sky appear. It was such a miracle. What person can do that? We prayed and then went into the water. It was the first time for all of us. It was all so new. He told me how to hold my nose, how to hold my hands. When he let me down into the water, and when he brought me up, the sun shone down upon me and there was such happiness. It was the sensation that something was born again inside of me. And we left smiling. When we arrived at Leninsky Prospekt for sacrament meeting afterward, it was raining again. Is this not God? And I am His loving daughter. This is a miracle. This is the truth.

On the one hand, I understand the gospel. To me it is truly a simple plan. It is only complicated when people are complicated. I was a difficult person. I had a complicated attitude toward life. I exaggerated much. I took a lot upon myself, a lot of which no one gave to me do. I had the impression that I must suffer, that I must endure, be tormented.

But it turns out, it's not necessary! To learn to live with unsolved problems, this is the example of God. We have the hymn "And God No Longer Suffers." He suffered. He fulfilled all, everything. And now He lives wonderfully, He is joyful, and He allows us to live with this freedom. On one hand, He says, "Do you want to be happy? Then please, take this road, and you will come to joy. If you take the other road, then it is your own, and no one knows where it will lead. But I am not there." That is how I understand the nature of God.

What was life like for you in the Church after your baptism?

In the beginning it was not easy. It was very difficult. I wanted everything to happen quickly, to do everything quickly—so that I could immediately be good and righteous. But the most unpleasant thing was that I wanted everyone around me to quickly become so pure, sincere, devoted.

I remember how during an interview with the first mission president I said, "Oh, President! I just can't do it! I can't watch these people. I can't listen to them! They are so selfish. Oh, it is so terrible. I just can't do it!" I am so grateful to President Browning. He was so wise and patient with me. My pride betrayed

me—this judgment of other people. I thought I was obligated to speak up or we would be left with only selfish people in the Church. He so wisely said, “Sister Galina, it’s so wonderful that these people have the opportunity (he didn’t accuse them, didn’t defend them) to come to God, that they have come to the true Church. It’s here that God gives them the opportunity to become cleansed from everything—this will be their work, and of course God’s work. All we have to do is be there with them.” But he also said, “And we too must learn.”

I also judged the Russian Orthodox Church the same way I judged members of the LDS Church. I still very much respect the Orthodox Church, which really does have so many good and sincere, faithful people. I no longer feel this struggle with them. I no longer feel this competition between who’s better, who’s worse. Truth does not contend, rather it simply lives its own life.

How did you find and become involved with Alcoholics Anonymous?

I was in terrible despair. I had put my husband in the hospital. I had tried going to different folk healers to be rid of my addiction. My husband had already spent a year in prison. Our sons were growing up—they were fourteen and twelve. I tried going again to the substance abuse counselor and asked, “What do I do now?” I wanted to speak to a doctor, but the head doctor of the clinic had just died, and his funeral was that very night. I later learned he was also an alcoholic. Even the doctors who worked with the alcoholics were alcoholics.

Two years earlier, the leaders of the Ministry of Health had traveled to America to do something about alcoholism in Russia. They became familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous programs, and our doctors and psychologists began to lead AA programs in one of the hospitals. In 1989, there were about fifteen alcoholics who had agreed to meet as the first group. One of them had been sober for six months, and he understood that if he would take this information further, these ideas, it would help. He went to the clinic in his area, where I also lived, and asked if he could post announcements. I read one of those announcements. I immediately ran there. They met me and said, “We understand you. It is difficult. We have been there. Please come.” I gave my

husband the announcement and a booklet. If he wanted, it was there. We went together Saturday and Monday—I was allowed to go with him so he would go.

In the beginning, my husband, Sasha, also liked the idea of AA. Just as we say about the gospel, many people like it, many people want the results of the gospel—the joy, the happiness, the freedom, the sincerity, and even communion with God as if by telephone. But we also have to do our part, just like in AA. The way the program works doesn't require or force alcoholics to do anything. They simply say, "Look at my life." That is why I believed. They told about their own lives, and that had been my life, exactly like mine. I am so grateful for those twelve simple steps. They are definitely like the plan of God. It is very simple.

Alcoholism is a constant battle within one's self. An alcoholic struggles within himself. When the light is lost, then the battle begins. I also struggled with my husband's alcoholism. I thought, "How is this possible? He loved me, and I loved him—we truly loved one another. How is it possible that love can't conquer this?" Even love cannot conquer alcoholism. When there is alcoholism, there is always injustice; it isn't fair. Alcohol deceives the alcoholic. It promises joy and freedom, promises to solve his problems. But it is a lie, fulfilled only in his mind.

Since that first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, you have participated in the founding of many AA groups in and around Moscow. Do you still attend AA meetings?

Yes, I absolutely continue to attend twice a week. In the first place, I need to. Alcoholics Anonymous has been working for seventy-six years and in more than one hundred and fifty countries. In Russia, even in some faraway corners and small villages, there are AA groups established. When I came, these people were there for me, and now I want to be there for them. If it wasn't for them, where would I be now?

How did alcoholism affect you and your family and your relationship with family members?

On the one hand, I considered myself completely worthless. On the other

hand, I had a lot of power. In families of alcoholics, if the husband is calm and quiet, then the wife is the head of the household. She controls everything and plans everything. And that's how it was with me. I upgraded our apartment, I arranged for the children to go to summer camps, and so on. And even though my husband was highly educated—he was a wonderful doctor, a wonderful person—I was the one who got him hired at two or three different jobs. I did it all. I elevated myself above him; there was nothing good about it. It's never good when one family member elevates herself above another. We say that the husband is the patriarch of the family, but that doesn't mean he exalts himself above his wife. It is so incredibly important to know and understand this, for both the husband and the wife. It is not God's plan to force another person to be someone. It doesn't help to try to force people. You can't rule over them.

Once, my husband took the children on the train to visit his father. He and his father got so drunk they couldn't find their way back to the train. The children came home terrified! It was after midnight. I understand now that he didn't do this to me or to them, but at the time I was in such a rage! I wanted to kill him! I was furious! They were crying, it was winter, I was running around, I didn't know where they were. There were no telephones. Where was he? And where were the children? There was no note, nothing. It was madness—insane actions that caused terrible harm. I blamed myself; it's really difficult to live with that kind of guilt. I felt malice along with the despair. I had a husband, but I was always alone. I understand now that while I was suffering, he was also suffering from my actions. We were in such a state that we couldn't be together.

Alcohol not only destroys the lives of people who drink. I quickly learned it had an absolutely destructive effect on me and so I quit. I felt that I was becoming a completely different person. But there is always a danger. This kind of dependency might be emotional. The family I grew up in wasn't healthy either; my father and mother also had problems with alcohol. For relatives of alcoholics, codependence is also an illness: a deep melancholy that arises inside. I am only where I am today because of the pain I experienced. It's a blessing from

God that I found Alcoholics Anonymous as well as the Church on my path. Now I remain involved with both.

How did you reconcile the problems within your family and in your marriage?

I counseled with a Church leader and asked what to do. He said that perhaps a physical separation would lead to a resolution. The separation did help. I calmed down emotionally. I began to feel safe. Sasha never hit me, but I was afraid that he would steal our money. I worked; he hadn't had steady work for several years. He would leave at night and return again at night. I was afraid of who he would bring home with him. This tension did not allow for the kind of freedom and the love we once had. I am grateful to God for helping me when I had to tell my husband, "I don't know where you will be. There's the hospital, there's the AA group, friends, the Church, a lot of help, but I don't know how to help you." I tried to save him. But I myself was dying.

Because of the decision to separate, I developed warmth, charity, and compassion, and I came to better understand him. I told him he could return if he didn't drink for six months, but by that time he no longer wanted to return. It was more comfortable for him with his illness to be with his mother. But he and I still stayed close.

How were you able to find peace and forgiveness?

Forgiveness, as I now understand, doesn't mean that I forget. Forgiveness is freedom from the pain I've lived through. Most importantly, AA helped me understand that I suffered. He suffered. Those who are now alcoholics suffer. Alcoholism is a disease. Sasha didn't plan to become an alcoholic. There had been love between us, but it dissolved in a pool of alcohol. I had tried everything, to endure it all personally. But it didn't amount to anything. Before his death, forgiveness did come. Little by little, God helped me. I came to understand, to sense that if I continued to blame him, then I wouldn't be working on myself—nothing good could come of it.

My mother-in-law is also a member of the Church. I know that she loved her son very much. It was very difficult for her, especially because he lived with her the two and a half years prior to his death. More than ten years ago, everything was painful for me. She supported her son and blamed me. She believed I was at fault. She said he hadn't been an alcoholic with her but became an alcoholic at home with me. There were misunderstandings on her part and on mine. There was a time when I blamed her too, just like she blamed me. I blamed his father for drinking with him. There were times when we all behaved like children. That's all going away now, leaving a deeper place inside me for more love and understanding.

Miraculously, for the past ten years I've had a wonderful relationship with my mother-in-law. She came to understand Sasha's alcoholism was an illness, that I wasn't the reason he drank. It wasn't that I didn't love him or that I had other men in my life, as she had accused. I've forgiven her. It's all forgiven. Now my relationship toward her is sincere. She is ninety-six. Once or twice a week I go to her house, prepare her meals, wash her floors. We read and we pray together, tell each other things. God does not force me to forgive at gunpoint; that's not forgiveness. Forgiveness is when gradually I understand. With the help of the AA program together with repentance in the Church, with these two inseparable parts, I am somehow whole.

The repentance process is continual, thank goodness. I need to repent of the mistakes I make, some of which might be very serious, but it is a great privilege. I wish I could take a pill, drink some water, and wake up humble, patient, loving, and kind. But that is not God's plan. The most important thing in AA is to be honest with yourself. In the gospel, too, you have to be honest with yourself. The gospel also helps me be honest with others and before God. If I feel that something is not right, then I can change it. If I feel something is amiss in my life, then I can change. Not just change in the sense that I can drink coffee one day and the next day not drink coffee. Not that today I engage in dubious activities and tomorrow look upon the cross. That kind of repentance is, of course, important, but beyond that, I can change the way I relate to

another person. The first commandments are to love God and your neighbor. God is not here among us, our neighbor is. I think that this is the opportunity to change.

I was afraid of all my weaknesses, my sins, my imperfection, and therefore, I was afraid of others, people who displayed weakness; when one looks on from the sidelines, others' weaknesses are always so much more apparent. But little by little, there was more friendship, more trust, and more openness. In this soil, love blossoms ever wider and wider. This is my life and I have a place. I have people around me who know me and understand me, and I have a personal relationship with God.

You're a psychologist. Do you enjoy your work? How does being a member affect your relationship with your colleagues?

Very much. It's a big part of my spiritual growth. My colleagues know that I am a member of the Church, and they very much respect my religion. I talk with them about the gospel in simple terms. They like the principles, and even more that I live these principles, not just talk about them. They don't suggest I work on Sunday. They don't swear in my presence. They walk away from me when they smoke. I try not to participate in gossip and bad jokes. I'm responsible and can be relied upon. I don't elevate myself above others.

It's amazing what kind of work God is doing inside of me. There's never a guarantee against mistakes; we should notice errors and ask, "How can I do better the next time?" I think mistakes are part of our growth. Without mistakes it is impossible to know what is better—how to do better, become better. In the Church, I continue to learn much, to humbly step back from my controlling nature. How wonderful it is to love God and know that although He is far away, there is something godly in each of us.

Peace through Conflict

Sahar Qumsiyeh | West Bank, Palestine

Interview produced by Barbara Christiansen
Originally published November 17, 2010

Raised near Bethlehem, only a few blocks away from the birthplace of Jesus Christ, Sahar Qumsiyeh intimately knows places that are considered holy by many religions. However, this significant area is marked by conflict and war, and as a Palestinian, Sahar faced barriers (both figurative and literal) to joining the Church. In this interview, Sahar describes how her introduction to the Church and understanding of the gospel enabled her to overcome the feelings of anger and frustration that accompanied her life in this turbulent region.

How did you convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

After receiving my undergraduate degree in math at Bethlehem University and teaching at an elementary school in Bethlehem for a year, I received a full

scholarship for a master's degree at American University in Washington, DC. I was really excited and planning on going there, but then I saw an advertisement offering scholarships to Brigham Young University for Palestinians. Even though I already had a good scholarship to American University, I decided to apply to BYU and was accepted to a program for a master's degree in statistics.

Everyone, including my family, told me not to go to BYU. I had also heard strange things about the Mormons, which made me discouraged. Despite this, I had a feeling that I should go there, and although I didn't understand why, I couldn't walk away from that feeling. So I ended up attending BYU. I was scared, but I went and felt at home.

I wasn't really interested in the Mormon Church, and the thought of joining the Church never crossed my mind. I was raised Christian—my family is Greek Orthodox—although over the years, my parents lost interest in religion. I personally lost faith in God because of many injustices that I had witnessed in Palestine. I thought that God must hate Palestinians because we were oppressed and the situation was really bad. I said my prayers but didn't think that God would listen or answer.

At BYU, one of my friends invited me to church and I went, but it was very different from what I grew up with, and I wasn't interested in returning. But then it was general conference, and my friends told me that they were going to listen to the prophet speak. I thought it was really strange that the Mormons believed there was a living prophet on the earth. I called my mom and said, "Mother, do you know what the Mormons think?" But I was curious and I decided to listen to what the prophet—at that time President Hunter—had to say. I don't remember exactly what he said, but he referred to my land as "Palestine" and that was a really big deal to me. After the Israeli occupation, Palestinians lost our identity and few people around the world recognize that we have the right to a land or a country; a lot of people call this country "Israel." My country, Palestine, doesn't even exist on a map. The word "Israel" shows up in its place. So hearing an American call my country "Palestine" meant a lot to me.

After conference, I asked a friend to tell me about the Church. She told me everything: she started with the creation of Adam and told me all the details of the Restoration. Other people in the room said that she was confusing me by telling me everything at once, but it all made sense; when you hear it all at once, it is simple and perfect. I started to show interest in the Church. One of my friends gave me an Arabic Book of Mormon and told me to read 3 Nephi 11 and pray about it. I thought that didn't make sense to pray about a chapter in a book, so I decided to read the entire book instead. It took me a few months to read but I knew it was true; I didn't have to ask Heavenly Father if it was true. I started going to church, and I decided to get baptized.

If other people had tried to convert me, I likely would have walked away. But my BYU friends just left me alone. That was good because I took my time to learn about the Church on my own.

How did your family react to your decision to be baptized?

When I told my family, they said that the Mormons had brainwashed me. They said I was crazy to even think about getting baptized. Their reaction was very difficult for me, so much so that I decided not to go through with the baptism. But I attended a friend's baptism, and I knew that was what I needed to do. I was finally baptized on February 4, 1996.

I have now been an LDS Church member for more than fourteen years. Over the years, most of my family has accepted my membership in the Church. But my mom still tries to convince me to leave the Church. Others in my family think that I'm lost and confused, but they don't say anything about it anymore. They know that I'm happy and they're fine with that. I was so miserable in Palestine before I went to BYU. After joining the Church, I was scared to go home; I thought I would be unhappy again, and I thought it would be difficult because my family wouldn't accept my membership in the Church. But I have been happy, even through difficult situations and even though my family tried everything possible to encourage me to leave the Church.

What has been your experience as a member of the Church in Palestine?

It was really difficult being a member of the Church when I returned to Palestine after being baptized in Utah. There were two other members of the Church in the Bethlehem area, but at the time I didn't know them. I felt very alone. Also, I couldn't go to church much of the time, because I lived in the West Bank, and the Israelis imposed travel restrictions on Palestinians living in the West Bank. I wasn't allowed to enter Jerusalem, and I often had to sneak into Jerusalem to get to church. Yet I had the Holy Ghost with me, and that helped a lot; having that joy and peace inside took care of everything.

I grew up a few blocks away from Christ's birthplace in Bethlehem. However, I never felt that site, or others in Jerusalem, had any significance to me personally. I believed in God but did not understand many things about the gospel. I hated living in Bethlehem and thought I was cursed for being Palestinian because we had very few human rights and were not treated with dignity. Even though I grew up in the Holy Land, I had to travel across the world to Provo, Utah, to get to know my Savior. After I was baptized and returned home, my view completely changed. I felt blessed to be Palestinian and to have the opportunity to live where my Savior lived. Every tree, every site, and every street reminds me of my Savior and what He has done for me. Out of all the places He could have chosen to be born, He chose my little town of Bethlehem.

Can you explain more about the restrictions that made it difficult for you to get to church?

Before 1987, Palestinians living in the West Bank were able to travel freely to any area in the Holy Land. The restrictions imposed by the state of Israel started increasing gradually. At first they stopped allowing us to drive outside the West Bank. Then they stopped allowing taxis, then buses. After that, they started restricting individuals from traveling outside the West Bank at all. Many checkpoints were established on various roads leading out of Palestinian cities. Different checkpoints allowed selected individuals—such as women or men over age fifty—to exit their cities (and go to Jerusalem, for example). The restrictions increased until no one was allowed to travel, except for the select few who worked in Jerusalem and were able to get a proper permit to enter

Jerusalem. In 2003, Israel began building the separation wall: a twenty-foot-high concrete wall that surrounds many Palestinian cities. The wall was designed to control Palestinian movement through designated openings in the wall. Now, permits are given to very few individuals, and the checkpoints that were simply roadblocks fifteen years ago are now bigger than an airport terminal. Because all travelers are searched thoroughly, the few who work in Jerusalem have to wait in line at checkpoints for hours each morning to get to work.

For many years, I didn't have papers to enter Jerusalem—where the Jerusalem Branch (at that time, the only branch in the Holy Land) meets—and it was very difficult to get to church. During the early years, I was able to sneak into Jerusalem by climbing hills and avoiding the checkpoints the Israeli soldiers placed at the main roads leading out of Bethlehem. Later it became more difficult as soldiers and checkpoints were placed almost everywhere. After the separation wall was built around Bethlehem, it became very dangerous and difficult to get into Jerusalem. Even after entering the city, one had to remain cautious, because soldiers would stop people and ask them for their papers.

Do you still struggle to get to church today?

The last time I snuck into Jerusalem for church was in 2007. At that time, the only way to enter Jerusalem was through a small hole in the separation wall. The hole was small—maybe a foot or two wide—and it was located about ninety minutes from my house, so I had to take a taxi to get there. Soldiers usually stood guard on the other side of the wall, so I had to wait for the Israeli soldiers to move away before climbing through the hole. We went through the wall in groups, and people were assigned to watch the soldiers and then they signaled to the rest of us when it was safe to go through the hole. I waited for about thirty minutes before the soldiers left, and then everyone squeezed through the hole. Then we had to run to another wall that was about ten feet high and made of concrete. Someone lifted me up to climb the wall, and then I jumped down the ten feet on the other side. It was rainy and muddy on the last day I snuck into Jerusalem. That day, I ran and hid behind a building, waited until a bus came, then jumped onto the bus and rode into Jerusalem.

Later, at church, a friend asked me what would happen if I were caught. I said, “I’ve never had to find out. I’ve been sneaking into Jerusalem to attend church for years, and I’ve never been caught.” A lot of times, I felt like I was invisible, because other people would be stopped and caught and I would get through. But that same day, as I was going home on the bus, soldiers stopped the bus. Two people—another man and I—didn’t have permission to be in Jerusalem. They took us off the bus and detained us for an hour. We were forced to sign papers that said, “I was found in Jerusalem on this date.” I was lucky because after we signed their paper, they let us go.

After that day, I was physically and emotionally exhausted from the stress of trying to get to church. For years prior, I sat in church thinking, “How can I get home without being caught?” and it took away from the focus of worship. I had promised Heavenly Father that I would try to go to church every week if I was able to, and I tried every week; sometimes I was able to make it through the checkpoints and sometimes I wasn’t, but I always tried. However, after that last time, I didn’t want to do it anymore. I prayed and said, “Heavenly Father, I am tired. Please provide me with another way to get to church.”

Not long after that experience, I started my current job with the United Nations. As a UN employee, I have proper papers that allow me to enter Jerusalem for work. Today, I go through checkpoints to get to church in Jerusalem, and they let me in. I am really privileged as a UN worker because I can go through any checkpoint, whereas the people from Bethlehem have to cross at one particular checkpoint, where it’s always busy and you have to wait in a line for three to four hours. It takes me about an hour and a half to get to church now, depending on traffic and how long I have to wait at checkpoints.

I am currently the Relief Society president in the Jerusalem Branch. Our branch has many members from all over the world: many BYU students, people working at the U.S. Consulate, and others working in Jerusalem. It is a challenge for us to reach out to the many members in the branch who live in West Bank cities and are unable to attend church. U.S. policy does not allow those working with the consulate from the West Bank into Jerusalem, and the BYU

Jerusalem Center rules don't allow those affiliated with the Jerusalem Center to freely travel and drive their own cars into West Bank cities. Therefore, we have members living in the West Bank who have not been able to attend Church services for over twelve years!

How have you found the inner strength to remain in the Church despite such difficult circumstances?

Knowing what it's like to not have the gospel makes a big difference; I'm so much happier now because of the knowledge I have, so it's easier to hold on. Heavenly Father has been by my side the entire time and has helped me through everything.

Amidst this conflict, I've been comforted many times. For example, one time Israeli helicopters were shooting at houses in my town. The electricity went out and the phones were dead, so we couldn't call our relatives to find out if they were okay. My family and I went up to the roof to see which areas were affected. I left my family on the roof and went down to my room and prayed, and I felt Heavenly Father's loving arms around me. I knew that He was there and He was protecting the people I loved.

Dealing with the conflict has been a real challenge internally. I've seen a lot of injustices done to my people over the years: restricted travel and curfews, friends or relatives arrested or shot for no reason, humiliation, loss of identity, house demolitions. When I was sixteen years old and attending Bethlehem University for my undergraduate degree, there was a demonstration on campus and some Israeli soldiers shot a student. The soldiers wouldn't allow us to take him to a hospital. For two hours he lay with a bullet hole in his head. That day, I developed feelings of hate toward the Israelis because of what I witnessed them doing to my people. After I joined the Church, that hatred kind of dissolved, but I still didn't love them.

One day when I was trying to go through the checkpoint to attend church, one of the Israeli soldiers told me to go back; he said I wasn't allowed in. I looked into his eyes and remembered a scripture I read in Matthew that morning in which the Savior said, "Love your enemies." It occurred to me that I



at a glance

Location: Beit Sahour, West Bank, Palestine

Age: 39

Marital status: single

Baptized: February 4, 1996

Occupation: database analyst

Schools attended: Bethlehem University, BS; BYU, MS;
Middle East Technical University in Turkey, PhD

Languages spoken at home: Arabic

Favorite hymn: "A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief"

didn't love the Israelis, and it really bothered me that I could not obey one of the Savior's commandments. I struggled with that and didn't know how to overcome those feelings. I came across a scripture in Moroni—chapter 7, verse 48—which talks about charity as the pure love of Christ. It reads, "Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love." I decided that this was the only way to gain love for my enemies; I couldn't love them through my efforts alone. I needed help from my Savior, who had perfect charity for everyone. He was able to love and forgive the very soldiers who crucified Him. If anyone knew how to love, He did, and I knew He could teach me. I decided to ask Heavenly Father to help me because living with anger and hatred damages the soul.

I prayed for this for a long time, and I thought He didn't answer, because I didn't notice a particular change. But about a year after I started praying, I was passing through one of the checkpoints, and I looked into the eyes of a soldier (who told me to turn back) and felt an amazing love for him. I knew that we were all children of God, and we don't have to hate the people who do bad things to us; we can just hate their actions, but we don't have to hate the people themselves. It was a tremendous comfort to me to learn that when Heavenly Father tells us to do something, He provides a way for us to obey His commandments.

The Palestinians and Israelis are seeking to establish peace. In order to do that, they have met at a negotiation table for years. I believe the only true peace has to come from the Prince of Peace Himself, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The peace that the Holy Ghost brought into my life after I was baptized has remained with me during days of trouble and conflict. The Savior said, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). Only He can soften hearts, provide feelings of charity, and supply that peace that my country needs.

Update from 2012:

As Relief Society president in Jerusalem, my main concern was members

who were unable to attend church in Jerusalem. We had Palestinian members in our branch who were not able to enter Jerusalem (which used to be my situation). At branch council, we discussed how to reach out to those members, since many of our branch members were not allowed into most of the West Bank cities due to work or BYU restrictions. Taking the Church to the members seemed easier than bringing the members to church. So, we started having sacrament meetings in one of the member's homes in Bethlehem. In August 2011, I was called as the district Relief Society president. Our district had three branches at the time: Jerusalem Branch, Galilee Branch, and Tel-Aviv Branch. I worried about being able to fulfill my calling because even though I had a permit to travel into Jerusalem and had a car, I was not allowed to drive inside Israeli areas. So, getting around to other branches in the district would be hard. As I prayed about whether or not to accept this calling the words of the Savior came to my mind: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). I realized that He would find a way for me to fulfill my calling and that He had called me for a reason. Since my call, our district name has been changed to the Jerusalem District.

In October of 2011, the district rented an apartment in Bethlehem and started having meetings there every Sunday. I was involved in getting the place ready and buying the needed supplies. The transformation that happened to the small basement apartment was tremendous. In February 2012, two years after we had that initial Church sacrament meeting in Bethlehem, an official church group was organized there. There were many obstacles as we worked toward having our own place and our own group. Satan tried everything in his power to stop this work. From losing jobs to sickness to contention, members seemed to suffer everything in our little group. Yet the Lord prevailed, and we are moving forward. I know the Savior is pleased to see the first official Church group in His hometown of Bethlehem.

In April 2012, I was invited by BYU to give a few talks. While in the United States, I thought about my future. I wanted to find a different job because

my job was very demanding and stressful. I was trying to find another job before quitting this one and therefore I was looking for jobs in the States. As I prayed and pondered about what to do, I felt that I should quit my job at that time and not wait until I found another one. I did not know if I had that amount of faith to leap into the unknown. Also, losing my job meant losing my privilege of traveling to other areas in my country; it would mean I would not be able to go to the other branches in the district and may not be able to fulfill my calling as I would hope. I received a priesthood blessing, and the Lord told me He would open up doors of opportunities for me. I know Heavenly Father is in control of my life, and I know that He will take care of everything.

A Pillar of Faith in New Delhi

Swarupa Katuka | New Delhi, India

Interview produced by Lyndsey Payzant Wells
Originally published April 6, 2011

Swarupa Katuka was born and raised in India and joined the Church in 1988. In 1995, as the mother of two children, Swarupa decided to give her third child to family friends who couldn't have any children of their own. In this interview, she shares an intimate look into her daily life, the state of the Church in India, and the relationship she has with her adopted daughter.

Tell me about yourself and your family.

I was born on May 10, 1964, in Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, India, to my parents, Appa Rao and Siromani Kommu. I completed a double bachelor's degree in science and education at the Women's College in Rajahmundry, and a master's degree in science from Andhra University in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh.



at a glance

Location: New Delhi, India

Age: 47

Marital status: Married on January 19, 1991

Children: One son, nineteen years old and serving a full-time mission; one daughter, seventeen years old in college

Baptized: June 10, 1990

Occupation: teacher

Schools attended: Government schools in our hometown

Languages spoken at home: Telugu

Favorite hymn: "I Believe in Christ"

I currently teach science to eleven- through fifteen-year-olds in a government school. I have been teaching for sixteen years. For fun, my hobbies include reading, cooking, and stitching.

My husband, Suvarna Kumar Katuka, is an immigration specialist and provides legal services to multinational corporations. We have one son, Joshua Kumar, age nineteen, who is currently serving a mission; and one daughter, Timnah, age seventeen.

What is an average day like for you?

Mornings start with prayers, and then I make breakfast and prepare to go to school at 7:50 a.m. The school I teach at is very close to our house, within walking distance. I get home from school at 2:15 p.m., make lunch, and usually rest for a while. Sometimes I accompany my daughter to her afternoon seminary class; otherwise, I stay home and clean or wash clothes.

In the evenings, our family of three has family home evening and then we have dinner together. Then I prepare for the next day; I don't usually go to bed until eleven o'clock or midnight. Before going to bed, I read my scriptures and write in my journal. Then I go to sleep. That's my basic routine; some days we visit other members, and some days I teach seminary too.

How did you prepare your son to serve a mission?

Joshua is serving in Chennai, India, more than 2,000 kilometers away. He writes us wonderful letters and he loves the mission. He is happy; he wanted to serve a mission from the beginning. I think the teachings at Church and meeting missionaries who served in our area influenced him. To prepare him to serve a mission, we usually had family home evening and family scripture study when the kids were young. We attend Church meetings 100 percent in our lifetime.

My husband joined the Church in 1984 and served a mission in India from 1985 to 1987. In fact, he and his companions were the first Indian missionaries to serve in India.

How did you first learn about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

I had been searching for a church to be baptized into; I knew that baptism was necessary for salvation. My husband's family is LDS, and his sister was my friend long before I married him. She introduced me to the Church. I went to the church a few times and felt good about it. I liked the Church organization and its systems. The LDS Church in our hometown was very small with few members, but I felt something and I joined right away without even telling my father.

I read the Book of Mormon after a year; the first time I read it, I didn't understand. I came to understand it slowly. Now I understand it fully with no doubts. The teachings and examples and stories are wonderful and good. We read as a family, and my children love the gospel because of the Book of Mormon. It truly affects our lives.

What is the Church like in India?

We have two missions in India: India Bangalore and India New Delhi. There are three districts in the New Delhi mission. We belong to New Delhi India District; there are seven branches in our district with about 1,050 members in the district total. I belong to New Delhi First Branch. We have about eighty members attending regularly.

We have regular activities outside of Sunday meetings, like a recent School of the Prophets conducted by our mission president, President Jackson. It was a wonderful meeting for all auxiliary leaders. I was really impressed and came to know better my responsibility as a member and as a leader.

As a Young Women president, I accompanied Sister Dalton (current Young Women general president) to visit some families in New Delhi, India. I was also asked to give the opening prayer when President Hinckley visited India in 2005. Six hundred Saints from all over India attended the meeting. For security reasons, we were not able to shake his hand, but I sat on the dais where he was sitting. We felt that he was a chosen leader and God's prophet.

What has been your favorite calling?

I have served in several auxiliaries like Primary, Relief Society, and Young

Women. I've liked all the callings, but I like Primary most, because I learned more in Primary. When I was baptized twenty years ago, the Church was very small in New Delhi, and there were very few Indian members. We weren't able to learn as much because there was no one to teach us. Now, serving in Primary helps me learn a lot with their songs and short stories; because of my limited English language skills, teaching in Primary is easier for me. Our branch conducts Sunday services in English; I use English and Hindi while teaching my lessons.

In 1995, you gave your third child up for adoption. What led you to do this?

My husband and I had had our second child in 1994 and felt that we were done having children. A short time later, we found out we were pregnant with our third child.

A man named Brother Luther was a childhood friend of my husband's; he is also a member of the Church and had been married for thirteen years, but he and his wife were unable to have children. I knew they had been trying to conceive, but they were unsuccessful. When I found out I was pregnant, I felt in my heart that our baby should go to them, but I didn't tell anyone. I thought it was God's will that I had become pregnant again and that maybe this child would be for them. I didn't even tell my husband; it is not easy to give a child away.

Meanwhile, the Luthers were called to serve a couples mission in the India Bangalore Mission. Our third child was born while they were serving. The Luthers called and asked us about the child; they said they had a dream that they were raising her.

One day, after they returned home from their mission, the Luthers called my husband and brought up the subject of adoption. They wanted to adopt our baby. I kept quiet, but my husband, jokingly, told them to come to New Delhi, and they came to our home to take our child.

My husband told me not to give them our baby, but I prayed to Heavenly Father in my heart and together with my husband. After much prayer, we decided to give our child to them. They took her when she was eight months old.

We don't know why the Luthers approached us to adopt our baby, above all other families, but God knows. Maybe it was His will; I don't know. We have never had any tension in our relationship with the Luthers since the adoption; we have good relations with them to this day. I'm happy we could provide them with such joy.

How did you cope with giving her up?

It isn't common in India to give babies up for adoption, but I felt like this was what I was supposed to do. The decision to let them adopt her was a great pain to me, but I felt that our friends were happy and blessed because of our choice.

When we gave the Luthers our daughter, I could see they felt much happiness as they had never before felt in their life. I knew she would be in good hands. Today, she is very pretty and a smart young woman. We call and talk to her often. She is a very good girl. She knows she is our biological daughter, but I have told her she is on a mission. Her mission is to be part of the Luthers' family, not ours, and provide them with happiness and joy. They are so happy with her in their lives.

Knowing this is her mission and that it is God's will comforts me. She is always in my thoughts and in my prayers. This was God's intervention; I know the Luthers' lives were blessed because of our daughter.

Update from 2012:

My testimony continues to grow day by day. My son will complete his LDS mission in India in December 2012, and my daughter is currently a student at BYU. I am grateful for these blessings in my life and for the ability to see the Lord's tender mercies every day.

To Smile and Talk Again

Agnes Twagiramariya | Kigali, Rwanda

Interview produced by Cherie Andrus
Originally published May 18, 2011

Agnes is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, in which one million people were killed over a one-hundred-day period in 1994. The Rwandan genocide is widely recognized as an extreme failure of the international community to protect people at risk of mass-scale atrocities. Although a witness to devastating horrors, including the murder of her parents and siblings by their neighbors, Agnes has embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ taught by the first missionaries in Rwanda, Brother and Sister Andrus, and is working to forgive those who killed her family. Agnes recently graduated from university and works as an accountant in a hotel in Kigali, Rwanda.

I, Sister Agnes, want to share my story with others by answering the questions that were given to me in order to help me to write my story.



at a glance

Location: Kigali, Rwanda

Age: 28

Marital status: single

Occupation: full-time accountant for Okapi Hotel

How did you learn about the Church?

It is a long story, but it is very important to me to talk about it. It was in 2006 when I met for the first time my two cousins, and one of them was a Church member. At that time I was preparing to continue my studies at the University of Kigali. My cousin Yvonne asked me to live with her, and I came to live together with her. When I lived with her, she started to teach me about the gospel. She showed me movies about the life of Christ when He was on the earth. She talked about the Book of Mormon, the content of it, and how it was written. She taught me how the Church was restored, and she showed me the DVDs about Joseph Smith and the Restoration of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

My cousin and I are the only two members of the Church in our family.

What did you like best about the Church when you were learning about it?

The first thing that attracted me was the teachings and the different testimonies of Church members I have heard. The other thing is the behavior of some Church members; they behave like children of the Lord. Their practice and talk is different than others. They try to do in practice what the gospel teaches them.

The other reason is the testimony of Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon. I read it and I found that book is true because it explains the Bible and it contains the true teachings.

How has your life changed since joining the Church?

My life has changed completely since I joined the Church. For example, I sincerely feel the joy of the Holy Ghost, who changed my life of sorrow and unhappiness into peace and joy. And I have started to smile and talk again. Because of His love, I found that all my sorrow my Savior took away, and He has left me peace.

I started to feel that I could forgive the people who killed my family in genocide. It was very difficult to me to forgive them. And after forgiving them,

I gained the total peace of my heart. For me, I choose to follow my Savior, and I will never choose another way for my life.

The gospel helped me to be strong in the face of life's trials because the whole New Testament shows us how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born and grew and started to meet trials and challenges in His life. But He never sinned. This is the reason why I choose to follow His good example as my Savior.

How was your family affected by the genocide?

There is no way to explain that, but for me, it was very bad to see our neighbors killing my dad and mama with sisters and brothers. We were six kids and our parents at home where we were happy with our parents, but the genocide killed my parents and my two sisters and two brothers and my relatives (like my uncle on my father's side and their children and the same on my mother's side). I still live with my elder sister, who has some problems because of genocide, and a few relatives, who also survived genocide. To lose my family, especially my parents, is a very bad thing in my life, and it has caused some behaviors like being alone, to hate people, to be unhappy for some time with a broken heart.

But today, because of the gospel and praying, I made changes in my life and I can be happy for a long time. I'm peaceful with a forgiving heart. I am able to forgive those killers of my family, even if it is very difficult to ask forgiveness for them. For me, forgiveness is a gift I've received after understanding the gospel.

What is your favorite thing about going to church?

For me, my favorite thing is that the Church is a nice family where you feel your brothers and your sisters as your own relatives. For me, because I lost my family in genocide, I feel in me that Church members are my brothers and my sisters. The reason why I am happy when I'm with them is because of the love and kindness they've shown me since I joined the Church.

Update from 2012:

On May 21, 2012, as I was in an airplane with a missionary couple flying from Rwanda to the Johannesburg Temple, my heart was full of joy because I

was thinking of how I had the opportunity to go to the temple. This trip was a special blessing that I had never dreamed of.

Some sisters helped me to do my family history, which was an amazing opportunity because it helped me better understand how temple work brings families together in the next life. The Holy Spirit taught me that I will be with my family, who were killed in the 1994 Rwanda genocide, forever. When I entered the temple, I felt their presence and tears came to my eyes, but they were not tears of sadness but of joy. Being in that holy place, I can now say that I will never cry again for the family I lost in the genocide because I now know that my family is not far from me. I felt their presence and their love. It was a great blessing to be able to perform temple ordinances for my relatives who had died without ever knowing the gospel.

Being in the temple increased my faith and helped me better understand our Heavenly Father's plan for His children. It strengthened my testimony of the truthfulness of the Church and of the Restoration through Joseph Smith. The temple is truly the House of the Lord where Heavenly Father communes with His children. The covenants I made with God in the temple will guide me throughout my life on earth. My temple trip was a wonderful blessing, and I hope that all Church members in Rwanda will be able to go to the temple.

Somewhere He Opens a Window

Dagmar Patricia Kollmeier | Frankfurt, Germany

Interview produced by Annette Pimentel
Originally published July 28, 2011

As an ambitious young law graduate pursuing her doctorate at The Hague, the Netherlands, Dagmar was introduced to the Church through her roommate. After serving a mission at age twenty-nine, Dagmar landed her dream job on the Yugoslavia Tribunal at The Hague, only to give it up when she was specifically recruited to work instead in the Church's public affairs department for Europe. Now as a mother and wife, Dagmar still works part time in the office of general counsel to the Church in Frankfurt, Germany. It has sometimes been painful and lonely for her to walk through those doors that have been opened to her and leave behind those that have been shut, but she believes the Lord is aware of her and is making use of her tremendous skills.

What prompted you to choose international human rights law as your career?

Even as a young girl, I thought there should be more justice in this world. Anything that was unjust or unfair frustrated me. I remember at school a group of children decided they would not talk anymore to a particular girl. I thought, “That is not fair! Why would you want to do that?” And so I kept being a friend to her, which made me feel very peaceful.

I grew up in southwest Germany, in a small village close to the city of Worms. I had a great childhood and a wonderful family. I enjoyed going to school. I did ballet and played the piano. I was a happy child and very fortunate. But I remember noticing that some children were not as fortunate as me. I thought that wasn’t fair. There was no one to blame, but in my mind, I thought they deserved better. I wished the world were more just to them. That’s how my interest in being a lawyer began.

Of course, that was probably the worst reason ever to become a lawyer. The very first thing I learned in law school is that justice and law have nothing to do with each other. The professor told us that they’re totally different things and all those students who were there because they felt like doing something for justice—they were in the wrong place.

Well, I didn’t leave. And I found out later in my studies that with international law, you can at least try to fight for the cause of justice, for human rights.

I went to law school in Heidelberg, Germany, and followed some classes in Italy. Following that, I went to the Netherlands to do my PhD. I specialized in international law and wrote my dissertation about the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, a United Nations court of law dealing with war crimes that took place during the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s. I also worked part time at the Tribunal while I wrote my dissertation. When I finished my PhD, I went back to do my bar training in Germany.

How did you come to join The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

I was a practicing Catholic growing up. We went to church every Sunday. I went to First Communion at age eight and to confirmation at age fourteen. But there were doctrines and teachings in the Catholic Church that I disagreed with. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity: I never, ever agreed with that. So the Catholic Church became less and less important to me. At some point I decided I did not need a church in order to be a faithful person. I never lost my faith in God, though. I always had a very strong conviction that God and Jesus Christ existed.

But life was hard at university. I was part of a huge group of students, and the ambition among them was extreme and not very friendly. There was fighting for books, fighting for better grades. I yearned for comfort, so I began to look for an organized religion again. I knew I wouldn't find the close relationship to God I wanted in the Catholic Church, so I looked elsewhere, in Evangelical Churches and even some Eastern traditions. But nothing gave me the answer I was looking for.

When I received my degree from Heidelberg, I had many questions about where I should go next. I had been to The Hague, the Netherlands, the "capital" of international law, briefly, and I felt drawn back there. I prayed intensely and persistently about very worldly matters like money, like housing. I said, "Okay, Lord, if Thou want me to go to The Hague, then I need a room there, and I need some income." One thing opened after another. A friend told me of an apartment. I won a scholarship. The Lord prepared the way.

My roommate in The Hague impressed me because her life basically was the opposite of mine. She lost her mother when she was young, only thirteen. After her mother died, her father moved to France, so she lived with her grandmother for a while and then with another person for a while. Her childhood seemed to me unstable and sad, but nevertheless she became a very happy, beautiful, optimistic person.

I always compared myself to her and thought, "If I had lost my mother at age thirteen, I probably would have been so sad and so hurt and so full of hatred with the world that I would have never managed to become a normal

person or a happy person. It would have just destroyed my life!” But she had something that made her so happy and beautiful.

I asked her about it. She explained to me that she knew that she would see her mother again and that they would be an eternal family. She was a flight attendant, but whenever she was in town on Sunday, she went to church. Since I was looking for a church, I thought that maybe I could just go with her once. I asked her and she said, “Yes, of course. But I am a Mormon, and we have only one chapel in The Hague, and we have to travel through the whole city to get there.”

The moment she said “Mormon,” I knew I had to have that. I didn’t know what “Mormon” meant, but I just knew that I had to become a Mormon too—at all costs. The Spirit testified to me that whatever she was telling me was right. She gave me the Book of Mormon before we went to church. I started reading it and I never had a doubt. I never prayed whether it was true or not—I just knew it was.

On my twenty-sixth birthday, I was baptized in The Hague chapel. When I found the gospel, I finally felt like a fish in the water. I had flapped in the air for so long, seeking for water. I felt liberated! I felt free!

It was wonderful to live the gospel! It wasn’t challenging: I had never smoked, I didn’t really like alcohol, and I always tried to live high moral standards. That wasn’t new to me. Instead, in the gospel I found pleasant and peaceful answers. For example, when I was ten years old and had to bury my grandparents, it was extremely hard because no one knew exactly where they would go and whether I would see them again. But when I found the Church, I finally got the answer: yes, we can be an eternal family. The gospel gave me answers and direction.

You served a mission. Tell me about how you came to the decision to go on a mission.

Shortly after I was baptized, I was thinking about a mission myself. But as I investigated whether I should serve a mission, the quotation from President Hinckley always came up where he said that it is not expected of women to serve a mission and that women should go on with their education and their

career. This convinced me that a mission wasn't meant for me. So I continued and finished my PhD.

Later, when I was doing my bar training, I talked to a young woman who had just come back from her mission. She had so many great stories that I loved listening to! One night, after spending the evening talking to her, I said jokingly to myself before I went to bed, "Okay, if I fail the bar exam, I will go on a mission."

The next morning I woke up and I immediately knew that it was not a joke at all but that I had to serve a mission, no matter the outcome of the bar exam. I was extremely surprised, even frightened, because I was already twenty-nine—pretty old for a mission, but that was just what the Lord had in mind for me.

My family, of course, was furiously afraid for me when I told them I was going on a mission. At that time, it was difficult for a lawyer to find a job in the first place and then, if you leave the law only for several months, you are not current because the law changes basically every day. You must update your skills all the time. My family was afraid that if I went on a mission for eighteen months that no law firm would ever be interested in me.

Then, after the call came, they were even more afraid for me because I was called to Temple Square. They thought, "Why in the world would they need missionaries in the headquarters?" They had heard bad things about minority churches, things about brainwashing, so they were afraid that bad things would happen to me.

Yet, they would let me go. I remember my father's words. He said, "You know this is not exactly what we had hoped and planned for you, but if this is what you really want to do, we will support you and help you in any way we can. Just promise me one thing: if you feel lonely or if you are sad, just come home immediately." He totally thought of himself in the second place. The only thing that was important to him was that I be happy.

While I was on my mission, my family came to visit me once at Temple Square. They saw that I was very happy. Of course I hoped that they would feel

the Spirit and become converted, but it did not happen that way. They still are very supportive, but they are happy in their own church.

How did you restart your career when your mission ended?

After my mission, I went home to my parents in Germany and started job hunting. My parents' fears for my professional life were fully justified. I got very harsh replies everywhere I applied. People simply would not consider my application, regardless of my degrees. They only saw that I had just finished a mission for a minority church, and they would not even consider hiring me.

The response was so discouraging that I didn't know where to go or what to do. Friends in the Netherlands saw I could not find a job and saw how desperate I was. A member of the Church there suggested, "Why don't you try with the Yugoslavia Tribunal again, because we now have a member there who is one of the managers."

I contacted him, and he said, "I am actually looking for a temporary person in my department." I filled every one of the requirements for the job. So he and another manager gave me an interview, and they accepted my application, just for a temporary job at first, but I have no doubt that the Spirit led me there.

After a few weeks I was offered one of the most coveted jobs at the Tribunal, a permanent position assisting a judge. This was the best job I ever had. I was so happy working for the judge, writing opinions and drafting memoranda. It was perfect. It was an exciting place. I was surrounded by young attorneys from all over the world. We were writing history because this kind of Tribunal was something totally new. I thought I would stay there as long as the Tribunal existed. That was my plan.

But my plan changed. One beautiful morning I was riding my bike to the Tribunal through the forest in The Hague, looking forward to my work and thinking how extremely happy I was to have the job I had, when I heard this voice in my head, "Then enjoy it as much as you can, because you won't stay very long."



at a glance

Location: Frankfurt, Germany

Age: 39

Marital status: Married to Björn Kollmeier (met in 2007, married in 2008, first child born in 2009)

Children: One daughter, Ann-Sophie Madleen, 17 months

Baptized: June 1, 1997

Occupation: lawyer

Schools attended: Rudi-Stephan-Gymnasium, Worms; Law school at University of Heidelberg, Germany, and Ferrara, Italy

Languages spoken at home: German

Favorite hymn: "A Child's Prayer"

Two days later I received a telephone call from the president of the Central Europe Area here in Frankfurt, who was at that time Marlin K. Jensen. He said, “Dagmar, we have a job opening in the Public Affairs Department, and we would like you to apply.”

I had met Elder Jensen after my mission. My mission president knew him and had suggested I meet with him when I was back in Germany since he was also a lawyer and might have an idea of how I could get a job. Elder Jensen invited me to lunch with the entire Area Presidency. The most spiritual lunch I ever had! I told them then I didn’t want to work for the Church because I loved to be among members of other faiths. But they thought of me when this job opening came, and because the Spirit had already warned me, I knew what to do!

Actually, it wasn’t that simple—not at all. I struggled. I was troubled. I listed the advantages and disadvantages. The list for The Hague and the Tribunal was a very long list, and there was no disadvantage at all. For Frankfurt and working for the Church, there was only one advantage, and that was that it was the Church of Jesus Christ. I wanted to serve Christ in any way I could. That was sufficient reason for me to quit my job and come to Frankfurt.

But it was hard. For me, it was very difficult leaving the Tribunal. I loved The Hague, and I loved the work environment. In taking the job with the Church, I didn’t know exactly where I was going, but I trusted the Spirit.

When I came to Frankfurt I began to realize what I had lost. I had worked at the Tribunal for a judge who was extremely challenging and demanding, and who taught me new things every day. When I first started working for the Church, I had a very, very administrative position in the Public Affairs Department. I was under-utilized and felt unchallenged.

Also, in the move to Frankfurt from The Hague, I had lost all my colleagues and friends. I felt very lonely. My coworkers were all Church members who already had their families and their wards. There were hardly any people my age in my office, so it took a while before I found friends. That was very hard. It was a dark time for me.

In my prayers and study, though, I felt that I wasn't alone and that coming to Frankfurt had been the right thing. In a while, the Lord led me to a very good friend. The Lord, the scriptures, and my friend—they pulled me through.

I changed departments and joined the legal department, which was a source of greater satisfaction because that used more of my training. I'm now Legal Coordinator at the Office of General Counsel of the Church in the Europe area. I have been assigned missionary visas and government relations. I help missionaries in the Europe area with visas and residency permits, helping them to stay legal in their assigned countries. In many countries they have difficulties. With government relations, I am in charge of establishing contact with European governments and helping the Church improve its standing.

In addition to changing departments, my attitude changed. I finally began to realize exactly what I am doing. Sometimes it is only administrative; I am just writing e-mails or such things. But in my small way, in baby steps, I am helping the Lord's Church to grow here in this area. That gives me great satisfaction. I don't regret leaving the Tribunal anymore. I think I finally understand what I'm doing and for whom I'm working.

You started your career with a passion for justice. Is that a passion that you have set aside or something that you work toward in your current job?

Part of justice is making sure that people wherever they are can enjoy religious freedom. I think that with the work that I'm doing, I'm helping not only the cause of the Church, but also the cause of religious freedom in general. In that regard, my goal has stayed the same.

In another way, though, my goal has changed. I'm very focused on sharing the gospel and doing missionary work through my work. So in that way, my professional life has a different emphasis than I had expected when I was in law school.

How else has moving to Frankfurt changed your life?

I think one of the reasons I had to leave The Hague to come here to Frankfurt was to meet my husband. In a blessing when I finished my mission, I was told that my job would bring me to my husband.

When I first came to Frankfurt, the senior missionaries in my office thought I should get married, so they arranged dates for me. I think in one year I dated every single person in southern Germany and Switzerland. It was frustrating because Mr. Right wasn't among them. Finally, another friend who knew both my husband and me arranged for a date without warning either of us before. I knew from the first moment I saw him that it was him. So, just as the blessing had promised, my job—coming here to Frankfurt—led me to my husband.

You are very close to your parents. What happened when you announced your marriage plans to them?

I was nervous when we went to explain to them that we would be married in the temple. I knew it would disappoint them, and I hate to disappoint my parents, but there was no other way. My mother was a little bit hurt that she couldn't be there. But we had a beautiful ring ceremony in a chapel, which is right on the temple grounds, after our sealing.

Also, during our sealing my family and friends were allowed to have a tour through the temple grounds and even through the lower part of the temple, up until you reach the reception desk. I think because they were allowed to enter a little bit of the temple, and because of all the attention they received from our wonderful recorder in the Frankfurt Temple, who gave the tour, that helped a lot.

You have a seventeen-month-old daughter, Ann-Sophie. Tell me about how you have combined work and motherhood.

For a year, I was only a mother, and I found that totally rewarding. For several different reasons, though, I had to go back to work at least part time. It's nice that I can use a different part of my brain for some hours per week. It's a very nice balance. For four days I am a full-time mom and then three days I am working a little bit.

I am really fortunate that I have family living very close to us. We live in Friedrichsdorf, a small town where the Frankfurt Temple is located, and my sister-in-law and parents-in-law both live there as well. They take care of Ann-Sophie two days a week and one day my husband is home, so she is always with family. My husband and I are glad we have found a way that he and I can both take care of her.

But still, there are challenges with working and being a mother. You want to do both perfectly: you want to be perfect at your job but also be a perfect mother. Having both jobs, here at the office and as a mother, is all-consuming.

Of course I am not in a position to do as much scripture study and intense prayer as I did before I had a child, but I feel that the Lord expects less from me time-wise when it comes to scripture study and prayer than He did when I was single. I open my scriptures every day, but sometimes I have the impression I get out of five minutes of intense study as much as I did in half an hour before. I think the Lord recognizes when we are trying to do what we can, however little that may be, and is willing to open our spiritual understanding immediately.

Update from 2012:

The last year has probably been one of the hardest I ever had. In addition to some personal disappointments and setbacks, our little baby son passed away during pregnancy. Giving birth to and burying a dead baby was probably among the hardest things I ever had to go through. Yet, I felt greatly comforted because I knew it was all in the Lord's hands. I also gained a greater testimony of the reality of life beyond the veil—both before and after mortality. The plan of salvation is so beautiful! Finally, I learned that most women, regardless of their personal circumstances, have their own burdens to carry. And yet, they are always willing to forget themselves, to help, uplift, and care for one another. I just love the women of this Church for the good they are doing. They truly make this world a better place.

Never Alone with the Gospel

Adeline & Véronique Defranchi | Talence, France

Interview produced and translated by Lydia Defranchi
Originally published September 14, 2011

French sisters Véronique and Adeline both credit their mother with their love of music and the fact that they both make their living in music. Both unmarried, they appreciate the fulfillment that comes from interacting with so many children and embrace the opportunity to have an impact on young lives. They also have an impact on their mother, whom they care for in their home. Their generosity of spirit and their willingness to engage deeply with others contribute to their rich enjoyment of a fully productive life.

Tell me what it was like to be raised in the Church in France.

Adeline: Our parents converted several years before our birth.

Véronique: In the '60s.

Adeline: Yes, so we were born into the Church, and we immediately had the benefit of a religious education. It was wonderful. We liked going to church; we enjoyed participating in activities and programs. We were pretty involved.

Véronique: Very much so. Our parents never had to force us to do things; we did them spontaneously because we enjoyed it. We liked seminary and institute. Not wanting to go to church simply wasn't a problem.

Why do you think it came so easily?

Adeline: First of all, we had a rather unique mother: she wasn't the kind of person to force religion on us, and she wasn't fanatical about it either, so we felt pretty free to choose. It wasn't our father's style either. I think there might have been something like a grace from God; it's a gift that it came so naturally.

Véronique: And maybe also a legacy from our ancestors. We are descended from a Protestant branch. They were Huguenots who fought for the right to live their faith, and perhaps in a way they gave us a legacy of faith. You could wonder why my father accepted the gospel (he was the first in the family), and I think it was because of this religious legacy that when the missionaries knocked on our door, he was ready. He wasn't a practicing Protestant, even though he had been raised to be, so there must have been something—something in the air!

You have both served missions. What brought on that desire?

Adeline: First off, all of our brothers served a mission. We have three brothers; the eldest set the example and the others followed. Véronique had always spoken of serving a mission, and I was kind of the little one watching. I didn't feel any sort of pressure to go because everyone else had done it, but in the end I wanted to serve a mission as well. I'm sure the examples of my siblings played a part, and there were all the mission stories they told when they came home. I wanted to experience it too.

Véronique: And I served in New Caledonia, the same mission as my older brother who had left a few years before, and it was a very enriching experience. I loved serving this people with so many different ethnicities, and I learned a lot.

It's something I will never regret, and I'm still benefiting from that today; what I learned on my mission continues to bless my life now.

Adeline: And for the funny story, Véronique wanted to go to a colder, English-speaking country, and she ended up in New Caledonia; and I definitely didn't want to stay in a Francophone mission, and I was sent to the Brussels Belgium Mission. But the Lord knows us better than we know ourselves, and it turned out to be an extremely enriching experience, especially since I returned to my birthplace, in the north of France, and found members I hadn't seen for years. There was a very warm atmosphere, and the people I served there were wonderful people and I loved my mission. It's at that time that I really understood the gospel's vital role in my life. It's not just some good thing—it's vital, and without the gospel, I am nothing.

Now you are both music teachers. Why?

Véronique: Well, it's because of our mother.

Adeline: Thanks to her!

Véronique: Yes, thanks to her. She received her piano diploma from the Conservatory of Rome. It was always an extremely important part of her life, and she fought for each of her children to study music and learn an instrument. And it really takes a lot of courage, because with children, there are times when they don't want to practice or do anything at all. My mother always fought to have us continue; she got us to our lessons, and in the end we all received music degrees. Of her five children, three of them play or teach music for a living, and another one did it professionally for a while.

Adeline: And honestly it was never a question of whether or not we wanted to do music. It was like breathing, eating, or drinking; we just had to do music! And I am happy about it because I truly love my job. I love teaching and I do not regret at all the fact that, in a certain way, my mother made the choice for me.

Véronique: It's also a job that allows you to have a lot of free time and flexible hours and an autonomy that you wouldn't necessarily have in another line

of work with a boss always supervising you. I manage my own classroom, and on top of that, it's so pleasant to be with children.

Adeline: Yes, the human contact with students and what we can bring them goes beyond just teaching them to play an instrument. Sometimes it's helping students who are having family issues or stress in their life; sometimes you almost act as a therapist. One of my adult students told me that she started playing the piano at a time in her life when she was going through a really rough patch, and that music had helped her to get out of it.

Véronique: We can also have an impact on their confidence. Of course, we could never replace their parents, but a professor has a privileged relationship with the child because sometimes the child is in conflict with their parents. There are tough times during adolescence, and the professor can be a third party. The professor is the master for whom the child has respect and with whom they can establish a special relationship. We can help children get through tough times with music and through the encouragement and support we give them.

And neither of you are married.

Véronique: No, we are not married.

Adeline: Not yet!

In the Church, we talk a lot about the importance of family. You are two sisters who live together. How do you experience the concept of family right now?

Véronique: First off—and this might be a bit unusual—we've never been alone. We've always been surrounded by people, whether it was our parents, whom we cared for when they were sick (and we're still caring for our mother), or extended family. Our brothers had children, so there are nieces and nephews. Even though we're single, we're a family.

Adeline: Yes, and it's been a pleasure. We're so happy to have a big family, to have nieces and nephews that we adore; it's enabled us to care for children from infancy through adulthood, to have a special relationship with them. And for us, that was a huge blessing.



at a glance

Location: Talence, France

Age: 42

Marital status: single

Occupation: music teacher

Schools attended: Bordeaux, Toulouse,
and Poitiers Conservatories

Languages spoken at home: French

Favorite hymn: "Our Savior's Love"

And it really makes you think about how the Lord always pulls something positive out of situations that would seem negative or difficult. It's true that we don't have husbands or children, but on the other hand, we've had time—time to care for our parents, time to care for our brothers sometimes, time to care for our nieces and nephews. And so we've had the opportunity to share our time with all of our family, which is something we couldn't have done if we had had families of our own.

Véronique: And in the Church too. We've been leaders in the Young Women's organization, we've organized camps, young adult and single adult conferences, temple trips. (*Editor's note: the stake's assigned temple is in Madrid, Spain.*)

Adeline: And Primary. And aside from all of that, we also have friends, members of the Church who are like family to us. We have wonderful ties with those people that go beyond just friendship.

And you also spend a lot of time with students.

Véronique: Yes. We're surrounded by kids—maybe we've just never grown up! We haven't aged; we're still constantly with kids.

A big part of your life is dedicated to caring for your mother; she lives with you and you have been her primary caregivers for years now. It isn't always easy. How do you cope?

Adeline: Our mother was an example for us in that way, because she was always very concerned about her family. She cared for her own mother, and it never occurred to her to think, "Okay, well now that I have my own family, the rest of my family isn't my responsibility anymore." Not at all. And always, even when she got married, she was concerned for her parents' and her brothers' well-being. I think we've inherited that from her.

She was also a very loving mother, despite having what you could call a strong personality. She sacrificed a lot, and she was a very generous woman. My dad would often tell me how he would "test" her when she was eating something he knew she really liked. He would ask if she'd give him a bite when there was only a little bit left, and she never refused once!

Finally, things just worked out so that we were able to care for her, and we're happy about it. For a while, she had to be in a rest home: after our father's death we cared for her for seven years, and things got pretty complicated because she couldn't stand to stay alone while we were at work, so she had to go to a rest home. After a few years, she expressed the desire to come back with us. It was a lot to set up, since with age she has become more complicated to care for, but we strongly felt that she should come back. It has been several months now, and things have gone incredibly well. I feel at peace. Having her come back to live with us was what we needed to do.

Véronique: And I think it's pretty normal, after everything our parents did for us. They cared for us, they sat up late at night, so it seemed normal that when the time came that they were tired and needed their children, we stepped in and the roles were inverted. It's the natural order of things, and we have been blessed and helped. We've always been able to find a way to make things work out. We've done it out of duty but also out of love—after all, what we've done with our mother we wouldn't just do for anybody!

In the end, we feel so blessed to be members of the Church, and I don't know what we did to deserve it, but we must have done something good! Having the gospel is such an advantage—having a direction in our lives, knowing where we're going, why we're here—and it helps us in tough times, gives us hope and support to overcome whatever may happen. In the gospel there's the “perfect” model for family, but outside of that there are many models: you could be a widow, you could be divorced, you could have children who left the Church, all sorts of different situations where in reality it's not much like the ideal model. But even if we're not in that situation, it's important to uphold the ideal model. Even if things don't go the way you wish in life, it's okay; we just need to keep the commandments and if we are righteous, the Heavenly Father helps us and we can have a fully productive life.

Whatever the situation may be, if we apply the principles of the gospel, we'll have a productive life, and that's what is important. Then any adjustments that need to be made will be made later. But just because we're single doesn't



at a glance

Location: Talence, France

Age: 47

Marital status: single

Occupation: music teacher

Schools attended: Bordeaux Conservatory

Languages spoken at home: French

Favorite hymn: "Abide with Me; 'Tis Eventide"

mean that we cannot accomplish anything and that we don't have a mission and a role to play on earth. There are great things we can do, and it would be silly to miss out because we're sitting at home wallowing in self-pity. And most of all, I've never felt alone with the gospel. When you're surrounded by family, by the members of the Church (even if they're not family, the members become our family), and when you have the Holy Ghost with you, you're never alone. It's a feeling I have simply never experienced.

Adeline: And we each have a place in Christ's Church. In Relief Society or elsewhere, I've never felt like I didn't belong because I didn't fit into the core family mold. It's true that we all have different lives, and we each follow a path in life that we didn't necessarily choose. *C'est la vie*, and you just have to deal with it. Even if we haven't received certain blessings, we've received so many other blessings that it would be incredibly ungrateful to only see what we don't have. We have a rich life. Sometimes with trials, for sure, and it isn't always easy, but the Lord gives us everything we need to overcome the trials of life, and the gospel gives us so much joy.

As Joseph in Egypt

Térèse Kanyanga | Seoul, South Korea

Interview produced by Krisanne Hastings Knudsen
Originally published April 20, 2010

In 2000, Térèse Kanyanga was living in the Republic of the Congo as a wife and the mother of seven children when her husband, Gilbert, mysteriously disappeared. Térèse discovered he had been accused of treason and exiled to South Korea. For the next six years, Térèse raised her children alone. In 2006, she was able to join Gilbert in Seoul, where she was baptized into the Church.

Why did your husband move to South Korea while you and your family stayed behind in the Republic of the Congo?

My husband was on the council of the state minister and was also working as a professor. As a member of the council, the state minister asked him to make a report concerning the political rebels in the Congo. My husband refused to

make the report because of the risks involved. His refusal angered the state minister, who then accused him of political rebellion. My husband was arrested and put in a military prison for two weeks. It wasn't possible for him to contact me in any way. The state minister feared that if they released my husband from prison, he would share confidential information with other people; so he decided my husband must be killed.

At this time there was a meeting with the state council. Some members of the Zimbabwean military were present, and they knew my husband. When they heard that he was going to be killed, they came up with a plan to help him. That night they freed him from the prison and put him on a plane to South Korea. Because of diplomatic relations between the Congo and Europe, the Zimbabwean military decided that South Korea would be the safest refuge for my husband.

I was very, very, very troubled by this situation. I didn't know where my husband was; I didn't know if he was in the Congo, if he was somewhere else in Africa, or if he was dead. It was very, very difficult for me during this time.

I had my seven children. At the time, the youngest was thirteen, and the oldest was twenty-six. I told my children that I didn't know where their father was. We were looking for him but we couldn't find him. There were many tears that were cried, and we were all very sad. I fasted and prayed a lot during this time. My unshakable faith was and is in my God and in His Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior. But I was also weeping because I was torn by the darkness of my husband's mysterious disappearance: Was he dead or alive?

My husband disappeared in November. When he arrived in South Korea, he contacted a friend in the Congo and sent him to find me. At the end of December, this friend found my oldest daughter and told her about the situation. When my daughter called to tell me that my husband was alive, I was very relieved and thankful to the Lord because at that point, I didn't know where he was or if he was even alive.

Were you able to support your family during those years your husband was exiled?

My husband's work had provided our income. Now that he was gone, we had very little money to live off of. We had a deposit saved up, but that money ran out quickly. I had no money to pay for the rent, food, or my children's schooling, so I started to sell things. I sold fry bread on the streets to support my family, so that we could survive. At this time the children weren't able to attend school. It was the most difficult, sad, bitter experience of my life: being a mother with seven children in my charge to feed and console.

Eventually, my husband was able to send small amounts of money over from South Korea to help us. He joined a Christian prayer group, and some of the members collected money for him. In 2003, three years from the time he left the Congo, he received his refugee status from the South Korean Ministry of Justice, which allowed him to work. He began to lecture as a professor, as he had done in the Congo, and made money from his lectures. For the next two years, he sent much of this money back to Africa to help support us. It was during this time that he joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

How was your husband converted to the Church?

My husband met a senior missionary at the subway stop on his way home from church on Christmas day. This was in 2005. They had a conversation and exchanged business cards. One month after meeting the missionary, my husband received a Book of Mormon in the mail. He was very skeptical of this book. He didn't understand it. He reluctantly agreed to have a meeting with the senior missionary and his wife that week. During the meeting, my husband wanted to tell them that only the Bible was the word of God. He was going to teach them! But he kept hearing the Spirit tell him, "Do not open your mouth. Let the missionary teach you." He obeyed the promptings of the Spirit and listened to the missionary tell him the history and purpose of the Book of Mormon. When the missionary asked him what he felt, my husband knew it was true. He was baptized two weeks later.

After he was baptized, my husband told the missionaries about his wife and family back in Africa. They all agreed that I must come to South Korea so that my husband and I could be together. The missionaries assured my husband

that they would provide enough money to purchase the plane tickets for his family to travel to Seoul. My husband then went to the immigration office to get permission to invite me and our children to live with him. Immigration granted him permission to invite me over, but they didn't grant him permission to invite our children. According to the law, our children were no longer dependents—as the youngest was now nineteen and the oldest was thirty-two—and were therefore unable to live with us legally in South Korea.

When I heard this news, I expressed my profound gratitude to the Lord, who had heard my prayers, comforted my broken heart, and wiped away my tears. But I was faced with a new heartbreak. I could go see my husband, yes. I could witness that he's alive. But I had to leave my children? I decided to pray, saying to my Heavenly Father, "Here I am, a poor woman, wife, and mother torn between the love for my husband, whom we miss, and the love for my children. My children and I are alone with You, our last defense. Not knowing what to do, I place my trust in Thee and my children under Thy loving care. I go to meet again my dear husband, 'the ghost.'"

When you were finally reunited with your husband, he introduced you to the gospel. What was that experience like for you?

First, I felt joy in hearing the name of the Church: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Then my husband, as the pioneer of our family, testified to me. He told me how he had met the missionary at the subway station and how he had understood the truths in the Book of Mormon. He said to me, "Really, really it is the true Church of God. Can you accept this?" The Spirit of God testified in my heart that this was the true Church of God with His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the head. I told him I would join this Church.

A few weeks later I was baptized by my husband, and I felt so much peace. I felt the love of God upon us because I had joined His true Church. I felt very strongly that this was Jesus Christ's Church on the earth today, and I was full of joy. Being sealed to my husband in the temple some time later was further proof that this was the true Church of God. He instituted the marriage covenant Himself in order for the family to be eternal. This is the love of the Lord.



at a glance

Location: Seoul, South Korea

Age: 55

Marital status: married

Children: Seven children (ages 34, 32, 30, 28, 27, 25, and 21)

Occupation: music teacher

Schools attended: Toyer Social

Languages spoken at home: French and Tshiluba

Favorite hymn: "There Is Sunshine in My Soul Today"

How has your spiritual perspective changed since coming to Korea and becoming a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Since becoming a member of this living Church, my faith in God has been strengthened, solidified, and is indestructible like a rock. It is the culmination of my many prayers. Our family suffered so much for those six years my husband was away. I asked, “Why was my husband sent away? Why are we here alone?” Now I think about what God told Abraham: “You live here. Go to another country. There I will bless you.” I think about God helping Joseph when he was sent away to Egypt. Joseph suffered much. He was in prison like my husband, and the blessing of the Lord came upon him. Ten years later, we know why the Lord sent my husband to South Korea. All is the plan of the Lord. The gospel is the gospel of faith. Each of us knows how we joined the gospel. Each of us knows how we met God. I testify that Jesus Christ is the Life, the Resurrection, my King, the subject of my faith. This is true. In the name of Jesus Christ, I testify. Amen, yes, amen.

Enthusiasm and Endurance

Ildikó Kovács | Göd, Hungary

Interview produced and translated by Rosalyn Eves
Originally published December 1, 2010

Introduced to the gospel as a teenager in her native Hungary, Ildikó had to wait four years to be baptized due to her family's disapproval. Ildikó discusses the challenges of joining a community that is still small in Hungary, marrying another Hungarian member, and raising her three children in the Church there. She expresses confidence in the Savior's role as the head of the Church, the practical and spiritual safety that comes from living by its principles, and the benefits of raising her children in the gospel.

How did you find out about the Church?

My parents lived in Mátészalka, and I went to high school in Debrecen. I lived with my grandparents during my high school education. I come from a faithful Catholic family. My parents had always taught me to be obedient to the

laws of the gospel. We went to church every Sunday. It was the same with my grandparents; they were also faithful and good people.

One day, when I was sixteen, my grandpa came home with a brochure, which said that we could order the Book of Mormon, another testimony of Jesus Christ. Since my brother attended a Catholic high school, my grandpa thought this might interest him. So, we ordered the book and thought it would come by mail. To our great surprise, two missionaries knocked on our door and brought us the book soon after we ordered it. As a teenager I thought, “Hmm. That was a pretty quick and *handsome* delivery!” We let them in and they started to teach us the gospel of Jesus Christ. We all thought it was neat, and we always felt peace and comfort when the missionaries came.

Then one day they asked if we wanted to be baptized in the true Church of God and learn more about the gospel. My grandparents and my brother decided not to. I, on the other hand, had this wonderful, peaceful feeling that I should be baptized. I had a great desire to learn more about the Savior and His Church. I knew in my heart that all I could learn here was goodness and love. I knew I could only be a better person, a better child of my parents, a better grandchild, and most of all a better child of God if I followed the Church’s teachings, which are basically Christ’s teachings. I prayed and prayed every night. I liked to kneel down and pour out my soul to Heavenly Father. I wanted a clear answer to my prayers that this was what I should do.

But I was scared. Now when I think back, I don’t even know why I was so scared. I knew my parents loved me very much, and maybe I was afraid that I would disappoint them if I told them I wanted to be part of another church. I didn’t mention anything to my parents, and I decided to go to both churches on Sundays (LDS Church in the morning, Catholic Church in the evening with my grandparents). My grandma even told me one time: “You’re gonna be a saint. You spend the whole day listening to the word of God.”

After two years, when I turned eighteen, I finally had the courage to stand in front of my parents and tell them that I wanted to be baptized. My dad got furious and said, “I won’t let you belong to any sect! Period.” We both started

yelling, and I'm sure the Holy Ghost wasn't with us at all. I remember I packed my stuff and went back to Debrecen right after our awful and useless fight. I knew I needed to be baptized to grow more in faith, but I also wanted to be an obedient child of my wonderful, loving parents, so again, I decided to please my parents and kept postponing my baptism. But it didn't stop me going to the "Mormon Church" on Sundays.

When I was nineteen, I had an opportunity to be a nanny in New Jersey, where I got in contact with the Church and attended the meetings every Sunday. I stopped going to the Catholic Church while I was there. I kept learning more and more about the gospel and the teachings and the way the Church works, and my testimony kept growing too.

After I came home, my first thing was to get in contact with the missionaries and ask them to have the discussions with me again, so I could be absolutely sure that I was doing the right thing if I got baptized. When a missionary told me, "Ildikó, you have an opportunity *now*, here on earth, to be a follower of Christ and be baptized in His Church," I had a crystal clear answer to my prayers, as if Heavenly Father had whispered into my ears: "You must be baptized. Can't you see? Make a decision and I will ease your mind and lift up your soul!" So, when the missionary asked, "Will you be baptized?" I said, "Yes." (Actually, since I was said to be an eternal investigator, the missionary said: "Ildikó, this is a serious thing. Don't joke with us." They thought I was joking when I said yes.)

After four years of being "only" an investigator, my baptismal day was such a precious day of my life. I will never forget it. For four years I had this dream that my parents would come to my baptism. They weren't there, but Heavenly Father made sure that I would feel peace and comfort on that special day. It was all perfect. I was baptized in 1995.

A year later, I sat down with my dad and told him I was a member of the Church. A lot of fasting and prayers preceded the day of our visit. I got an assurance from Heavenly Father that everything would be just fine and I shouldn't be scared to tell them the truth. Dad was calm and we had a wonderful talk.

He said he knew that I had been baptized. He wanted to know why I finally told him after one year. I said, “Because you are important to me, and I want to share my happiness with you. How can I be fully happy if those I love the most don’t know about what’s most important to me?” He accepted my decision. My whole family did. They still keep a good distance from the Church, but my relationship with them hasn’t changed a bit. We love each other dearly, and I know that someday—maybe not in this life—they will also be brave enough to recognize the light in the true gospel.

What was it like, being a new member of the Church in a place where the Church is still fairly new?

It’s very difficult to be a new member of the Church because all of a sudden, a lot of the things that were natural to you, like, let’s say, not buying a ticket when you get on a bus, or cheating on a test, no longer seem okay. Before I joined the Church, I only thought that big sins—like big spots on clothing—mattered, but little ones wouldn’t. Actually, I thought you could forget about the little things. But all of a sudden, you just start realizing that your little sin is a stain; it’s like a small dirt spot on white clothing—it’s still dirty. That’s why on the one hand it’s difficult to adjust to these new standards, but on the other hand, this is the only way that you can say, “Yes, I tried to be Christlike.”

That’s why I think a lot of new members, first they get enthusiastic, and then they find out that, “Oh, I’m doing this and this isn’t right, and I’m doing that too and that isn’t right.” If you can’t handle it and you can’t change for the better, it’s easier to be rather inactive. But this is the one thing that I think differentiates our Church from others; it’s much more about the subtle things, the little things that you have to change in your life to be more Christlike—not just about whether you kill someone or not, because it’s easy not to kill anyone, but it’s not so easy not to work on Sundays or not to spend money on Sundays when everyone else does. Once you realize this and make it a habit, it becomes easier and easier.

I always say I have two important things in my life: enthusiasm and endurance. You have to be enthusiastic about the Church and God and the teachings

and the gospel and the scriptures and the temple, because if you're not enthusiastic then you won't continue to stay here. Once you've got this enthusiasm, then you need to endure. For example, since I work with the kids, it sometimes seems useless to go to Church. For six years I've been in the Primary on and off, and I cannot tell you the last time I was in Relief Society or Sunday School. You know, you make an extra effort on Sunday and get up earlier and prepare the clothes, and I'm thinking, "What did I gain from this Sunday?" Most of the time, I have to tell you, I don't gain anything. I don't do anything different than I do at home, only with more kids. But you have to appreciate what you have at the moment, even the things you don't like, because this time won't last forever. I know this time is going to be over sooner than I think, and I can be active again in Relief Society or Sunday School.

Here's the other thing: you have to forget about relying on others. If you want a spiritual experience, you have to create it for yourself. You can't always expect Sundays to be the most uplifting days or times of your week. If you go to Church with expectations, you will go home disappointed; but if you go there with enthusiasm, then you come home renewed. When I hear my six-year-old's accounts of his learning in Primary, I know he's growing in faith and I know right then it was oh-so-worth going to church.

I also think that you have to grow up to these things. At age twenty, twenty-one, you think differently than later, when you're closer to thirty. Plus, being an eternal investigator, I could see more clearly what the Church was all about.

Growing up in Hungary, most people have this mindset that there's their life and there's the church somewhere else. But our Church doesn't work like this. You live in the Church; you live with the Church teachings. The Church belongs to my life; it's not a separate thing anymore. All of a sudden you start thinking about the Church not just as something distant, or as a concept; all of a sudden the concept becomes a reality, and you realize that, "Holy cow! Do I really belong to the Church of Jesus Christ?" And if you think of this, if you think of the Church like this, that this is Christ's Church, you can't just say this is a concept far away from me. I can't imagine my life without the Church. It's



at a glance

Location: Göd, Hungary

Age: 35

Marital status: married

Children: Barnabás (6); Julcsi (4); Tomi (2)

Occupation: full-time mother at the moment; graduated as a teacher of English, also a translator and interpreter

Languages spoken at home: Hungarian

Favorite hymn: "Sweet Hour of Prayer"

not just the structure of it, but it's Heavenly Father. I couldn't learn more about Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ elsewhere than in the Church.

I know that you married in the Church. How did you meet your husband?

In 1999, I was an English major at a university in Debrecen, and in my last year I decided to write my thesis on Mormonism. I applied for a scholarship and I got one to USU (Utah State University). The scholarship was for one semester. Not too long after I came home, I was sure this was it. I wasn't going to get married; I was just going to be part of the ministering of angels.

Shortly after that (in February 2000), there was a district conference in Budapest, which I attended. A mutual friend introduced me to Laci (pronounced "Latsi"), my husband. Laci was a relatively new member of the Church then, because he was baptized in 1999. After the meeting, this common friend called me and asked what I thought about Laci. I told him, "Well, I like him. He's nice. Finally I've met a smart guy in the Church—somebody who doesn't have depression problems, who has a job and went to school—someone who seems normal."

Then my friend told me that Laci had fallen for me. A couple of days later I got a phone call from Laci, and I was so relaxed—I thought, "This guy already likes me so I don't have to worry about what I say. I don't have to act like I'm more than I really am." After we had dated more, we found out that this common friend told Laci the same thing: that *I* had fallen for *him*. That's why we were so comfortable talking on the phone for the first time.

After six months, he proposed, and I said, "Oh, I'm just too young." To be honest, I'm very scared of making commitments. I just questioned my maturity and I said, "Let's wait a little bit. Let me find a job in Budapest so we can be closer instead of seeing each other once every two weeks." I just wanted to make sure this was what I wanted. So I looked for a job, and I moved and we saw each other more, almost every day.

I think at age twenty-six you're mature enough to use both your heart and head when you decide to get married. I wanted to be in the Church forever, so

I figured I had to find someone who was strong enough in the Church. Now here was this guy who just barely got baptized and then went to the temple. But the fact that nothing was shocking for him in the Church, or that he never doubted things, made me realize that our marriage was the right thing. Our civil marriage was at my parents' place in Mátészalka in July 2001, and we got married in Spain, in the Madrid temple, a week later.

How has being a member of the Church influenced your marriage?

I really like that my husband has always wanted to follow the counsel of the person who sealed us. The sealer told us, first, that we should never go to bed if we have bad feelings toward each other. He also said that we should always pray together and never yell at one another. Praying together is so essential. You can almost look into the other person's head when you listen to his or her prayer carefully. It's the same with the children. I love to listen to their prayers, not just because it's cute but because it's amazing what's in their head, and you find out things that otherwise you wouldn't have an opportunity to find out. I think prayers are wonderful.

When you're single and you go to Church regularly, and if you really listen to the teachings, the teachings of old and recent prophets, you have a very clear picture of what you would like to expect in a marriage. Then, if you follow those lessons, you don't say, "Oh, it's still okay if he's lazy." "Oh, he's not reading the scriptures, but it's going to change when we're together." I never believed in these things.

I'm not saying that our marriage is perfect or that our family life is perfect—it's definitely not. You know, sometimes people, especially young women, in the Church come to me and say we're a "holy family"—oh, I wish! It's a very good thing to have your faith in the right place; you can turn to your faith and the teachings of the gospel and it's always there for you. We have our ups and downs in our marriage, as well, but I think it's really a great blessing that both Laci and I have the same goals. When we have difficult times, it's just wonderful to have something stable in the home, and the stable thing is your faith and the Church. You both know where you should turn to, and you turn to that

way and you get out of any difficult situation. We know that because we have our endowments, we want to get out of any slump, and we turn to God again. I love that.

The Church has also helped our marriage in practical ways. Just recently my husband was out of a job for a longer period of time. Thank goodness we are both good savers. I think our saving comes not just from watching our parents, but also from following the teachings of the Church, because this is what you hear in the Church all the time—that you need to be prepared. Even when my husband earned relatively good money, we still didn't spend more. We felt gratitude, thanked Heavenly Father, and saved money for worse times. We thought, "The kids don't need big things; we don't need to go to Hawaii from here to have a nice vacation—the Balaton (a lake in Hungary) is perfect." Oh, we were surely grateful and happy to have those savings, otherwise we would have been in big trouble. It was difficult to see that there was no money coming in, just going out, but because we had saved when we had the opportunity, we didn't feel hopeless.

What is it like raising your children in the Church in Hungary?

We have three children: Barnabás, Julcsi, and Tomi.

I like that talking about the Church, God, and Jesus Christ are so natural to them. Secularism is all around us. People don't like to belong to a church; they don't want to follow standards. They want to set their own standards for themselves. If my children see someone smoking, my oldest child asks, "Do they know God?" I say, "I don't know," and he says, "I don't think he knows God because he smokes." It's great to see how they store the teachings of the Church in their heads.

I like that they grow up in the Church. I don't think it's a disadvantage, and I don't think it will be a problem for them, because the Church is growing in Hungary and I'm hoping they will have friends in the Church to do lots of activities together and they will see other nonmember young people, as well, and will see the difference. They are still very young and want to follow their parents'

teachings, and I have to admit I still wonder sometimes what it is going to be like when they become teenagers and face peer pressure.

It always seems easier to look at the Church from a distance than to be in it. But once the doctrines and correct behavior become habits, everything goes in the right place. You have to be consistent in everything. I admit that we're horrible at doing family home evenings. For us, it's something we have to work on. You have to be consistent when it's about going to church, as well. The children got used to getting up early on Sundays. It takes us about forty minutes to get to church by car. The meetings start at nine o'clock in the morning, so everyone should be up by six-thirty at the latest to get ready for church.

As parents, our role is to do our best and give the most we can; we have to love and nurture our children physically, mentally, and spiritually. I do not want to look back with fear of regret. I'd like to think back and say, "I've done all I could to teach these children the gospel of Jesus Christ to help them learn and find out for themselves as well."

Nothing Short of a Miracle

Gina Traynor | Dublin, Ireland

Interview produced by Louise Elder
Originally published July 27, 2010

Gina talks candidly about her struggle with infertility. A lawyer by training and a convert to the Church, Gina overcame a fear of doctors and hospitals to complete IVF (in vitro fertilization) treatments, resulting in the birth of her daughter, Ella. Gina reveals a deep gratitude for her supportive husband, although not a member of the Church himself, and their precious daughter.

I am the fifth of seven children, and I grew up in a little seaside village in North County Dublin, Ireland. My mother raised us to be a close family. She didn't work, so she was there for the seven of us all the time, from the minute we woke up until we went to bed. She always tried to keep things nice and calm and make us happy, and I think that drew us together. I was always content at home, and my siblings and I all have a very strong sense of family. In fact, when

I was investigating the Church, the thing that attracted me the most and that still does today was the whole family focus. I not only loved the eternal aspect of it but the emphasis that it is the most important thing, and not only with your immediate family but your extended and your ward family.

Can you share more about your conversion?

It started with two Mormon missionaries calling to the door, who were very nice boys. When they gave me their introductory spiel, I said to them that it was terribly fascinating, but that I was not remotely interested. However, I genuinely thought my flatmate (and best friend) would be curious, so I invited the missionaries to come back and talk to her. They came back on Sunday night, and after that they kept calling and, while it was very nice, I really didn't feel that it was for me. I did like the spirit that they brought to the house. I didn't recognize it as that, but I knew that I liked it.

Then I became the "eternal investigator" and spent two years tormenting and questioning poor missionaries who would take my questions off to the mission president and then arrive back the next day with the answers. It took me those two years to join the Church, but I am really glad that it did because I had asked every question, looked at every angle, and I was fully committed to it. It wasn't just a spur of the moment of, "I feel the Spirit; I have to join." By the time I joined, I really was comfortable with it. I was living the way that would be required of me, so it was just a natural progression and the right time.

What helped you make the leap from "eternal investigator" to baptized member after two years?

I know that there is a perception that people join the Church because there's something missing in their lives. But there was nothing missing in my life. I was perfectly content. I was doing everything I wanted to do. I was happy with the way my life was going, and there were no gaps or holes.

Church was something completely different, and I remember thinking of joining the Church as being the most illogical decision I've ever made, because it was just so out of character. Everything else was so predictable: I did

a diploma in law, then I got my degree, then I worked in a law firm. It was all kind of planned, whereas my conversion to the Church was so right of center. The response from people who knew me was almost, “She’s done what?!” And yet it was the best decision I ever made in my life. I felt strongly it was right for me, but I couldn’t logically work out why. It took two years for it to become that strong of a feeling and, in the end, I just couldn’t ignore it and I had to go with it. It was as simple as that.

When did you meet your husband, Peppe?

We were in the same class at college. I started my course in October and then I joined the Church in December. All in one year I went to college full time, switched to working at night in the law firm where I worked, met Peppe, and changed my religion! I think everyone around me was shell-shocked!

Was there ever a question that because Peppe was not a member of the Church that you would not marry him?

I never had a boyfriend from the Church; no one from Church asked me out and there wasn’t much opportunity to meet anyone, so my best chance of a serious relationship was with men outside of the Church. Peppe and I were friends for years before we started dating, so I was very much used to him and his ways. Once Peppe and I started dating, we knew quite quickly that it was serious and then we knew quite quickly that we wanted to get married.

I was concerned because I knew I couldn’t have a temple marriage with that choice, and I did have doubts, and I did say many prayers about it because it was not the ideal. But it was my reality, and I felt that he was the right man for me. There wasn’t anybody else I wanted to marry. I don’t have any regrets about choosing him for a partner even though he is not a member of the Church. For me it was not enough that someone was a priesthood holder; they had to be right for me as well. Of course I would absolutely love for him to be a member of the Church—it would be a lie to say otherwise! But I just didn’t meet anybody inside or outside of the Church who was as nice as he is.

How have you balanced living the gospel in your marriage and supporting each other in your different beliefs?

Honestly, I think he supports me more for sure. He has always supported me in my callings. While he likes to drink his coffee and his wine, morally we have very similar beliefs and that was most important to me. I consider him to be a very Christian person, and one of his most attractive qualities is that he is very thoughtful and caring for people less fortunate than he is.

He is very spiritual, as well, and we can pray together and share a lot of aspects of the gospel together. We have family home evening, and he is perfectly happy to participate, and he likes that, but there are certain things he has no testimony of whatsoever and I don't expect him to.

When did you realize that you might struggle to have children?

We didn't plan to have children immediately after marrying because we wanted to have a couple of years together alone. When we did start trying for children and it didn't happen straight away, I went to the doctor to have my hormone levels checked along with my iron levels because I'm vegetarian. To me, it was just a project that had to be managed properly, quickly, simply, and that was it. I never expected there to be any real problem.

Peppe got tested too, and I just thought this was a box to be ticked in the process. But when he went to his doctor to receive his results, the doctor told him he had azoospermia. He picked me up after work and as we were driving home and he said, "Now, you're going to get a bit of a shock here, but the doctor said I have a zero sperm count," and I just started to laugh. I thought he was joking.

I spent that weekend crying and he was worried as well, and we just clung to each other. In amongst that though was the feeling that we didn't get married just to have children; we had married because we loved each other and we wanted to be together and we still had that, and we would deal with whatever this turned out to be. At that point we were confronted with the very real prospect that we would never have children. We didn't know anybody for whom IVF had worked, so it wasn't even an option in our minds. We had a weekend of shock and trying to take in this kind of "sentence."



at a glance

Location: Dublin, Ireland

Age: 42

Marital status: married

Children: one little girl, Ella, age 5

Baptized: December 1993

Occupation: lawyer (but currently a stay-at-home mam!)

Schools attended: primary and secondary school in Skerries, Co. Dublin; Law school: UCD, Dublin and The Law Society of Ireland

Languages spoken at home: English

Favorite hymn: "I Lived in Heaven"

What happened next?

Peppe had an appointment with the doctor quite quickly after that, and we were told he was perfectly healthy and this was obviously just some blockage. His hormone levels were fine; he was creating sperm but it was just not getting through. The doctor suggested we try ICSI (Intra-Cytoplasmic Sperm Injection), which is the next stage after IVF. We looked at it, but I was not keen on the process because I was incredibly nervous of doctors and anything medical, so it didn't seem like a real option for me. I think at that stage I just felt that we weren't going to have children or that maybe we would adopt.

We had almost a year of tests for Peppe to make sure he was okay. Then in Ireland you have to attend a meeting at the clinic before you can even be put on the list to meet with a consultant for the possibility of IVF treatment. They only hold these open nights twice a year and we had missed the first one, so there was another gap before we got to the meeting. I cried through the whole thing as they described the process and what it would involve to a room full of poor couples in exactly the same position as we were. When we left that evening, I did not know how I was going to do it. I was so nervous about all the time we were going to spend with doctors and in hospitals, managing drugs, and doing procedures. But if we had been in this situation even ten years previously, we would have been told to put our names on the adoption list as IVF would not have been an option. (ICSI as a process only really developed in Ireland in the mid-1990s.) So I felt a responsibility to make use of the technology and knowledge that had been developed in that time for our good.

How did you support each other through this time, and what was the impact of this treatment on your marriage?

Once we had found out it was a male fertility problem, the doctors had to do an operation where they put him under general anesthetic and then extracted sperm so that we could freeze it. He was really quite relaxed about it. I think a lot of men would have great difficulty with this and they might feel that this in some way affects their manhood, but Peppe just felt that he was healthy and fit and lucky to be able to try the treatment. He was really positive. I didn't

have to be sensitive around him about the issue, and we would actually laugh or joke about it. I think the reality of it was that this was either going to really upset us, or it was going to bring us closer together, and I do think it brought us closer together.

One of the challenges of infertility on couples is that by the time you get pregnant you have been through an awful lot, so you are already tired before you even have a baby. I was committed to the idea that this was the man I had married, and I was glad I had married him irrespective of whether or not we could have children. I think Peppe knew that and it helped him relax.

What was the next part of the process for you?

I had to start taking various drugs to stimulate my ovaries to produce as many eggs as possible. Then the doctors harvest the eggs and try to fertilize them, and when they are fertilized, the doctors put them back in the mother's body. It was a case of balancing the drugs and having my hormone levels checked every couple of days and then adjusting the dosage to make sure I was feeling comfortable while the doctors were still getting the eggs that they needed. The drugs worked well for me, and I produced twenty-something eggs, which was a bit ridiculous—I felt like a battery hen! I was really, really lucky that I had produced so many because a high number gives you a better chance of fertilization.

The only problem was that I got hyper-stimulation after they took the eggs, and that meant that when they went to transfer the fertilized eggs back, I was already sick and in terrible discomfort. I ended up in the hospital from the sickness, and I lost those fertilized eggs in the process. Originally, I had said that I would only do the procedure once, and if it didn't work we would not try again. But because I had been sick, we felt we should go through the process again when I was healthy. On our second attempt (a cycle involving frozen zygotes), I became pregnant.

What were your emotions during this time?

It was a combination of excitement and anxiety because we went through so much to get to this stage of pregnancy. It is an incredibly emotional roller

coaster, but of course we were absolutely delighted and we just felt really, really blessed because we didn't know anybody for whom this had worked.

My pregnancy was hard, but that had nothing to do with the IVF. I happened to contract sinusitis when I was three months pregnant, and I had it for the rest of the pregnancy. I think my body was a bit in shock after all that it had been through to get to that stage: the pre-pregnancy drugs, the IVF treatment, the whole mental stress a year beforehand.

Being from a big family, it feels strange to me to only have one child, but we know we are really blessed to have the one we do have, and we both feel very lucky to have Ella in particular. We definitely feel she is ours and that she was given to us for a reason.

How did the gospel help you through the IVF process?

I felt there was something bigger than me, that I am only a little part of the bigger plan, and that if I was meant to have children, I would. I didn't feel the same level of desperation that perhaps somebody who doesn't have the gospel in their life might feel. Of course, it is a desperate time for all couples, and I think for women in particular. To have the possibility of having children taken away from them is very despairing. But with the gospel, I absolutely felt a strength. I started out so terrified of anything to do with doctors and hospitals and medical procedures, and I absolutely feel that I got the courage to go through it all from prayer—my own and those of others—because I don't know of anyone who was as afraid as I was! I definitely received inner strength from my faith. I felt it would be okay, whatever the result. I never felt absolutely confident that we were going to end up with a baby, but I did know we were going to come out of the situation intact. I didn't try to judge the outcome; I just tried to make the best decisions that I could in the circumstances.

My sister, who is not a member of our faith, asked me if I felt that I was being punished for something, and I never felt that. I wouldn't like anyone else to have to go through what we did, but I didn't feel it was anything other than a trial I needed to experience. I do feel confident that it was for a reason, and

having gone through it, I am glad that I did. I thought it was very hard, but I didn't feel angry about it.

What is your advice to other women in similar circumstances?

By trying the IVF process, even though I was so nervous about it, I felt that I showed Heavenly Father that I had done my best and everything I felt I could do, knowing that He could help me as His will allowed. I think some women can try IVF only once, and some women can do ten cycles and maybe get pregnant on the tenth one. It depends on the woman, and it is a very personal thing as to how many attempts you can mentally and personally deal with. I don't think anyone should feel forced into doing something that isn't right for them.

Throughout the process, I think women should try and make time for themselves as well. I don't think I made enough time for myself the first time. I was still trying to carry on a busy career and go through the process, and I did not slow down enough. You need to do something that makes you feel confident that you can make the situation work for you so you can endure it. Do whatever it is that you feel you need, just so you don't have any regrets.

I think women push themselves so much; they feel they have to be mothers, career women, wives, daughters, sisters, and they try to juggle so many different roles in their lives. While struggling with infertility, women just need to put themselves and their own physical and mental health first.

How has your faith grown since having Ella?

Oh, it's grown immeasurably. She is such a blessing—she really is, and I just know beyond any doubt that she was sent specifically to help us, for this little baby has taught me so much. She has been great at bringing Peppe and me closer together as a family. I would never say a couple isn't a complete family without a child, but I feel that she helps us be a better family, and I think we are better as a couple for having her.

She is the best little missionary. She has made Peppe so much more tolerant of and in tune with the Church. Before we had Ella, there was no real need for him to be in church with me on Sundays, but every Sunday for eighteen

months he attended nursery with her because she refused to stay in there alone. If he hadn't done that, then I couldn't have served in Primary. That's a great indicator of what a support he is to me. When she moved up to Primary, everyone was teasing him that he had been released! He comes to sacrament meeting with us, and then he goes home and we go to our classes. A little while ago she asked him why he didn't go to the daddies class, and so the following week Peppe went to the first priesthood class that he had ever been to! He is fully supportive of raising Ella in the gospel.

I think that you are more aware of the wonder of life when you have gone through the IVF because it is such a miracle. This whole medical intervention to help us have a child is nothing short of miraculous. But even though the doctors do exactly the same thing to each couple, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. I really do feel that it's a miracle that it worked for us. I think it has made me very overprotective and very cautious as a mother, but I don't take things for granted anymore either. People say, "I'm going to get married. I'm going to have children." And those are normal expectations in life. But once that is interrupted or taken away, when those expectations have changed, you can't take anything for granted ever again.

Update from 2012:

My daughter Ella is now seven. I am still a stay-at-home mum but am assisting Peppe in setting up his own practice with the goal of going back to work as a lawyer on a part-time basis. I'm currently the Relief Society president, and I'm still shouting from the hilltops that IVF can work!

The Small World of the Gospel

Faustina Otoo | Accra, Ghana

Interview produced by Neylan McBaine
Originally published November 13, 2009

The first time Faustina Otoo went to church, in Nigeria in 1985, the members' love made her feel like she was in a "wonderland." Since that day, Faustina's journey in the Church has taken her back to her native land of Ghana, where she now serves as the front office receptionist at the Africa West Area office complex at the Accra Ghana Temple. As the single mother of two children, Faustina is especially proud that her daughter is about to graduate from college.

How did you first become acquainted with the Church?

I lived in Lagos, Nigeria, with my husband and my children, and I found the Church there in 1985 through a friend. This friend and I were going to meet part way to the church so he could go with me, but when I got to the

meeting place, he wasn't there. So I asked people around the area and they directed me to the church. This was a small place in Lagos, and when I got there the morning session was over and people were coming out of the meeting. And everybody that came out met me, or shook hands, or hugged me, or gave me a kiss—a peck on the cheek. My friend was nowhere to be found and I was like, “What is going on? I don't know these people!” I have not seen such love anywhere in my life. I was a bit scared. I said, “Did my friend sell me to these people or are these people crazy?” I was really, really in a wonderland.

Then the couple missionaries asked if they could tell me more about the Church before the afternoon session was packed. I loved everything they told me. I loved the story of Joseph Smith; even though I was skeptical, something told me it is true, it's right. So I accepted the Book of Mormon and went home, and I fasted and prayed. And I loved the testimony from the Spirit.

I got to a time in my life when I was wondering. I asked myself three questions: Why am I here? What am I doing here? Where will I go after this life? That was when I really started going to church. And I was jumping from one church to another. I remember the very day we were coming to the Latter-day Saints church, my little daughter was about ten years old, and she said, “Mom, why are we changing churches every day?” And I said, “Well, until we find the church that is right we will never stop going. We will keep going until we find the Church of Christ.” And that is when I came to this Church.

I was given the triple combination scriptures. I prayed, “Lord, I have read in the scriptures that we should not add or remove anything from the scriptures. Why this Book of Mormon? Why do I have to get another scripture?” And after my prayer, I took the book again and I opened. It went straight to Doctrine and Covenants section 138, where it talks about the three days of the Lord in the spirit world and how He organized the righteous spirits to bring the gospel to the unrighteous, and it made sense to me. It makes sense. This section 138 makes First Peter in the New Testament clearer, when Peter wrote, “For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit”

(1 Peter 4:6). What Peter wrote is more reasonable to me now that I have the Book of Mormon. And so I accepted this book. I got baptized, and my daughter got baptized with me.

You mentioned a husband. Were you married at this time?

Yes, I was. It was a difficult time in my marriage because my husband was going out with other women and doing all sorts of things. So he left us on our own. I was a full-time housewife and things were very difficult for me. But that's when I found the Church. He never came back, and we finally got divorced.

When he left us, I told everybody in the Church that I needed a job to sustain myself and my daughter. I stayed in Nigeria for two more years. I met Sandra Rogers, a white lady from Utah. She made me feel that I am also a child of God; she became my role model.

I finally decided to come back to my country with my daughter. I am from Ghana originally, and my son was already living back in Ghana too.

You now work as the front office receptionist at the temple office complex in Accra. What led you to this position?

When I got home to Ghana, I was practicing hairdressing to raise my children. I decided to do some cleaning jobs too, and I got to clean the homes of the Area Presidency here. At that time we did not have this temple complex, so they just had a lot of offices around the city, and I was cleaning those Church offices too. In addition to cleaning, I was serving as a Church welfare missionary in the employment resources center. There, I learned computer and office skills and all those things very well. There I got a job as a part-time secretary to the Church Educational System coordinator. I worked in the CES coordinator's office as a part-time secretary for two years. Now I am at the front office in the Africa West Area office here at the temple complex.

Have you had experiences while you've been working there that have helped your testimony grow?

Yes, a lot of them. I remember before we moved into the temple complex here we were in a rented place. We had a visit here in Ghana from Elder Burton

of the Presiding Bishopric. I've listened to his talks a lot in general conference. He is a good speaker, and I love to listen to or read his talks. When he came here, he was going to meet with the area managers and their spouses. I was not an area manager, and there was no way I could attend that meeting and hear him talk. So I prayed, "Lord, I know that I don't belong to this category, but I want to sit at the feet of this, your servant, and listen to him talk." The following day, the Area Temporal Affairs Director came to the front office and said, "Faustina, Elder Burton is going to talk to us tonight and I want you to be there, even though you are not in the area management. What you can do is help my wife get the place ready, and then when everybody is settled, you can also be there to listen." It was a wonderful experience for me. I got a chance to listen to Elder Burton.

Another instance was when Elder Holland came to Ghana with his wife, Patricia. Then also, I wanted to be there. The then-Area President's wife, Sister Jolene Pace, called me and said, "Faustina, Sister Holland is meeting with some sisters. Will you please come and help make my house ready for her?" So I cleaned the whole place and got it ready. I got a chance to sit with Patricia Holland and listen to her and learn from her. She gave me a gift of a book she wrote.

Those kinds of experiences clearly help you feel connected to the core leadership of the Church. What else helps you feel connected to the women of the Church, specifically?

Just a month after my baptism, I was called to be the Relief Society president in the Bariga Branch in Lagos, Nigeria. At that time I didn't even know what the Relief Society was all about. I answered the challenge, and that's when I started working with the sisters. I asked questions and I learned hard. It was a small branch, so I was the Relief Society president and the teacher, the compassionate service leader, a visiting teacher—and I did all of these things with the help of the couple missionaries. We went and visited everyone, and I encouraged the sisters to come.

I didn't know if I was doing anything good until about ten years later when I visited the ward in Lagos that I had been baptized into. When I got to the Relief Society room, a woman was standing before the sisters, teaching them. She ran to meet me when I entered, hugged me hard, and she was all in tears and she told the sisters, "I am here because of this woman. She taught me how to come to church, even though I had to change many buses before I got here. She taught me how to take care of my children, how to prepare simple, nutritious food for my family during homemaking. She taught me how to pray for my children."

Since I moved back to Ghana, I've also been involved in the Relief Society here. Recently, I lost my father, and we held a funeral. All of my Relief Society sisters were there to support me. When I got home, a friend called and said, "There were only four sisters in our Relief Society meeting that Sunday. Everybody else went to your father's funeral!" It showed me that we are working together to bring our families to Christ. These sisters really make me feel good. We relate to each other very well. Visiting teaching is good. Enrichment is wonderful: we eat, we learn, we dance! It's so fun. I love it.

Would you tell me about your children? You have been a single mother for many years now. What have been the greatest challenges of raising two children by yourself in the gospel?

I actually had three but I lost one. When my marriage was over, I prayed to my Father in Heaven. I said, "Father, I did not go to university or college. I have been a housewife all my life. But I put my hand in Thine. I want my children to go to university—whatever it takes. Help me." I washed, I scrubbed, I cooked, I did all sorts of things. Any job at all I would do, just to send my children to school.

My daughter is graduating from Utah Valley University in April 2010. You can imagine how that makes me feel. Sometimes I have to pinch myself and see if I'm still alive—to see if this is happening in reality. The Lord has dug me out of a pit, a pit even deeper than the pit of Joseph when his brothers threw him out to be eaten by wild animals. The Lord has brought me out of that pit to a



at a glance

Location: Accra, Ghana

Age: 55

Marital status: single

Children: three

Baptized: December 21, 1985

Occupation: receptionist, Africa West Area Office
of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Favorite hymn: "How Great Thou Art"
and "Where Can I Turn for Peace"

high mountain. I can go into the temple and I can sit in the celestial room and I can talk with my great Father. I am so blessed and I am so happy. It's really good.

I have a lot to improve upon. But from where I am coming from, the Lord has carried me on His shoulders.

Personal Revolutions

Rostya Gordon-Smith | Prague, Czech Republic

Interview produced by Neylan McBaine
Originally published June 4, 2012

As the nineteen-year-old daughter of a Communist leader, Rostya defected from Czechoslovakia in 1969 after the country was invaded. Although raised atheist, a powerful conversion experience while living in Brazil has led Rostya to a lifetime of dedicated service to the Church abroad, culminating now in her position as National Director for Public Affairs for Czech Republic. From Prague, Rostya vibrantly describes her life of faith and revolution.

You left Czechoslovakia in 1969 after it was invaded by the Russians. How did you manage to defect?

I was born in a mountainous region of Czech Republic and my father was a colonel in the air force. He was in the Communist Party. He always wanted to fly, and the Communists gave him a way to live his dream. In 1968, when I was

yelling at him and telling him he was the cause of the turmoil in my country, he said he would have sold his soul to the devil to fly, and that's exactly what he did.

My parents were very into each other, and my sisters and I were sort of accidents of their love. My father was tough on us. My name is a boy's name; he wanted a son and he treated me like a son. He was a ski jumper and a very daring man, so I did skiing and gymnastics and figure skating.

I was basically raised by my grandmother and grandfather because my parents traveled so much. Because of my grandmother, I am who I am. They had a factory that they lost to the Communists, and then their only daughter married a Communist. That is a story that runs right through the Czech society. I had a very happy childhood: everything was paid for by the party—all my sports, my textbooks, everything. We had a cabin in the forest where we spent two months every summer mushrooming. I go mushroom hunting to this day because I love it so much.

But in 1968, the Russians invaded the Czech Republic, and I was right in the middle of it. It was like a curtain opened and I saw a different world. Up until that point, I had been sheltered because my father was such a big deal that I did not have to comply. No one questioned my loyalty. But when the Russians invaded, I was nineteen, and I had to make a decision to join the Communist Youth or not. I realized that I couldn't live there anymore.

What did you see behind that curtain that convinced you that you couldn't live there anymore?

All of a sudden we could listen to the BBC or the Voice of America. We suddenly had access to correct history. I didn't feel betrayed, really, but I just realized I didn't want to live in that society. I said, "I'm not a child anymore. I will have to join the party or become a dissident." I wasn't brave enough to be a dissident.

It was August 21, 1968, when we were invaded. I was going to go camping with some friends, but the phone rang and my friend was yelling, "The Russians invaded us! The Russians invaded us!" I rushed to the window and

these tanks with the red star were rolling down the street with Russians behind machine guns pointing in the windows.

When you live in Central Europe, you're raised with the war because it is everywhere. I had friends whose parents survived concentration camps and had tattooed numbers on their bodies... You live it there, because it was there not long before. I always thought if a war came I would just go kill myself because I couldn't be a hero. I couldn't take it. I lived with these horrors from my youth, heard them from the mouths of the victims. It was an extraordinary thing though because I found myself doing the opposite: I found myself saying, "I'm going to stay and fight for my country."

My college friends and I ran into the streets and started tearing down the street signs so the Russians couldn't navigate around the city. Because we speak Russian, we staged a demonstration. There are several bridges over the river in Prague, and we sat on one of the bridges. The tanks came and lined up opposite us, and they raised their guns and aimed and they shot above us. Then we talked to the soldiers in Russian. Some of them didn't even know where they were—they were young, some only sixteen—and they thought they were in Germany, so they were surprised we spoke Russian. We said, "What would your mother say to see you doing this?" And we would give them cakes and cookies. We basically talked them down. They were so demoralized they had to change the whole army division in Prague.

I took photographs of the invasion in Wenceslas Square, and I handed them out to foreigners so the message could get out about what was happening to us. Because I did that I was taken to a police station and beaten, but then they found out who my father was and they let me go.

My father was put in prison, and my mother left us all and immigrated to Vienna. I was left with my two younger sisters in Prague. I was nineteen, and my younger sisters were eighteen and eleven. I had no money. I hitchhiked to my grandmother's house and stayed there until my father got out of prison. That was when I told my father I had to leave.

My father got me a passport through a friend in the Ministry of the Interior, but I still needed a visa. One of my friends, a boy from school, was Jewish and living abroad at the time of the invasion. He arranged for me to work as a nanny for a family in London. To get a visa, you had to have a letter saying a sponsor would pay for you and take care of you, and this family wrote that letter.

My father saw me off at the airport, and he said, "I know that you are the only one of my children who will make it." And those were his last words to me. I never saw him again.

I left on January 3, 1969. I felt like I was free. To celebrate, I bought myself a packet of cigarettes on the plane. This is 1969. This is the height of long hair and short skirts. My grandmother had told me in England the women were very elegant, and so she made me a dress of brown and white checks, wool, with a white Peter Pan collar and white cuffs to my wrists. We had no pantyhose—we had instead stockings that were shaped like the leg and had seams in the back and were held up with garters. I must have looked a sight arriving in London in 1969!

When I arrived in the airport, the family that was sponsoring me was not there. I had made friends with a college boy on the airplane, and he helped me call them. Even making a call on a public phone was new for me. It was a Friday evening around seven o'clock, and they said, "We have a houseful of company. Tell her to come on Monday." They had no idea what I had just gone through. I thought I would just live at the airport for three days, but the boy invited me to stay with some friends of his. Those college boys thought they got a pretty good deal with a Czech chick landing on their doorstep!

Life with those boys was a party. People were making out on the stairs and everywhere else. All these British college students wanted to know about the invasion, so I was an instant celebrity. There were three boys I lived with: one was a Welshman called Dai, one was an Englishman named Nigel, and the last was an Irishman named Jim O'Connell. Three characters! Jim studied Russian, so I was speaking to them in Russian. Nineteen sixty-eight was a big student movement throughout Europe, and at home in Prague we had been led to

believe that the students were beaten and oppressed and poor, because that's the way capitalist countries worked. I was sitting on the floor one night with the boys, I remember, telling about ourselves and I realized the Communists were right. These poor university students were so poor they had to roll their own cigarettes! And they had to share them! I thought, "Well, look at me. I'm from a Communist country, but at least I have my own cigarettes. You poor things, you have to roll your own." I quickly figured out what they were rolling was not the same thing I was offering!

These three boys decided to take me under their wing, even though I did move into the family's house to nanny. One taught me how to drive a car, one taught me the rules of rugby, and the last taught me how to drink Guinness. A perfect education. Life skills!

They took me shopping so I didn't have to wear my wool dress anymore. We bought a tight miniskirt—which I still have to this day—and boots, and we went to the hairdresser and then to tea. I had a feeling they wanted to talk to me about something, so as we were having our tea Jim said, "Rostya, is it against your religion to shave your legs?" I said, "I have no religion. I'm an atheist. Why should I shave my legs?" He said, "Look around you. You can't wear a miniskirt and not shave your legs." So we went back to the apartment and they gave me their razor. There was blood everywhere! They are friends of mine till this day.

After about two weeks of working for the family as a housekeeper and nanny, I realized I couldn't do that for long. That wasn't the career I wanted. I was always a bit lazy at school; things came easy to me and I played truant. And so suddenly I realized without education I couldn't get anywhere. I worked very hard, took my English lessons, went to school, did my Cambridge Proficiency Exams, and was accepted to London University. It took me a year and a half after I arrived to enroll in university.

They waived the fees for school for Czech immigrants because they felt guilt about giving our country away to Hitler in 1938 but we had to prove capable of supporting ourselves. I told them my mother lived in Vienna—which was true—and that she would support me, which was not true. I had very little



at a glance

Location: Prague, Czech Republic

Age: 62

Marital status: married 40 years

Children: four—ages 35, 34, 33, and 26

Occupation: CEO of a consulting and training company in human resources development, called People Impact

Schools attended: elementary and high school, Czechoslovakia; University of London, UK; Simon Fraser University, Canada; Macquarie University, Hong Kong/Sydney, Australia

Languages spoken at home: English, Czech, Portuguese

Favorite hymn: "I Know That My Redeemer Lives"

contact with her after she left. My father had to publicly disown me. I was tried and sentenced in my absence for two years in a rehabilitation camp if I ever returned. But the British immediately gave me asylum because they knew I was in danger because of who my father was, so thankfully I never had to fear being turned in. I was a really small fry anyway; the Czech government had bigger problems than me. The British gave me a work permit, a student permit, and asylum.

In the mornings, I used to go to a train station and sell newspapers in a booth and running along the train. In the evenings, after classes, I worked in a bar in a hotel shaking cocktails. I met my husband about two weeks into college at a drunken party in a cellar. He comes from an upper class family. His father had been the military attaché to the Prague embassy, so he spoke Czech. I met Simon and we had a date, and then he took me to his parents' house for the weekend where there was a big party. As we were driving back into London, we stopped in front of Big Ben and he asked me to marry him. Our second date! And I said no. And it took two years till I finally agreed.

When we got married, we got a little house in Dorset and he went off on his first engineering job to Scotland, and I started my graduate work. I got my teaching diploma. He was building bridges in Scotland, gone for long periods of time. He came home every five weeks for about four days. That was the shape of our marriage. Then he came back one day and said, "How do you feel about going to Brazil?" I reached for the suitcase and said, "How fast?"

We went to Brazil. I had a network of Czech friends in England, and my husband joked that once we went to Brazil he wouldn't be hearing Czech for a long time. We belonged to a sports club in Brazil, and I was sitting there sunbathing, and a group of American women there were very friendly and came up to me and introduced themselves. One of the women said, "Gordon-Smith is English, but Rostya sounds Czech." And she started speaking Czech to me! Her family had left Czechoslovakia in about 1947 when she was a little girl. She had moved to America, married, and she was a Mormon.

I invited her to my house, and we were chatting away in Czech. My husband thought, "Those darn Czechs, they are everywhere!" She invited us to her house for dinner about three days later, and it was the weirdest thing because she called our house and invited us to dinner, but then she said, "Bring a salad." I put the phone down and I said to my husband, "The strangest thing just happened: we were invited to dinner, and they asked us to bring food." This was unheard of in Europe! So we went to dinner, and there were these two young men in short-sleeved white shirts with little black nametags... I found them rather uninteresting at dinner and just ignored them.

Zsazsa, this Mormon friend, introduced me around to her friends, and we started playing tennis with them. But none of them would show up on Sundays. We thought that was the oddest thing. We said, "Where were you?" And they were all at church. I said, "Well, fine go to church. Get it over and done with, and then come play tennis with us." And they said, "We go to church the whole day!"

You were raised atheist. Was there anything in your youth that suggested you were looking for the truth or for some spiritual meaning?

My grandmother was very religious. I remember every time I went out or had a test she would make a cross on my forehead. I remember once she decided I should go and have some religion, but it had to be all underground. So she signed me up for a Catholic catechism class, but I was thrown out because I drew a mustache on the Virgin Mary's picture. That was the end of my religious education.

They were fellowshipping us, Zsazsa and her husband, Don, and I said to my husband, "We need to be really careful because they are Mormons, and they're the people who do exorcisms and roll on the floor when they pray." I had no idea. Then, they invited us to a stake conference. President Kimball came to announce the temple being built in São Paulo. I remember President Kimball standing there, a very small man. Everybody was singing "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet," and he was waving. I found myself in tears. I was really moved. My husband was moved. We felt something. We quickly wrote it

off as mass hysteria. But then we were invited to a fireside at the mission president's home and it was President Tanner and President Kimball. As we were standing around outside, President Tanner said to me, "I understand you are not a member." I said, "I am certainly not a member, and I have no intention of being one." He put his hand on my shoulder and he said, "Don't worry. You will make a good member."

Zsazsa talked to me about the Church all the time. She offered to drive me around to all my errands so she could trap me in the car and talk to me about the Church! Otherwise I wouldn't listen. This way I couldn't escape.

How did her approach not affect your friendship?

It was the way she did it. She was very gentle. I wouldn't have listened except that she and her husband intrigued me. They were extremely good examples. They were ten years older than we were, so they had children. I noticed how they talked to each other, the fun they had, how they were raising the children, and it struck me because I had come from a divorced family. They reminded me of my beloved grandparents. They were fun. They were normal.

At the fireside, we agreed that the missionaries could come teach us. The elders were taught to teach in Portuguese, and they had this old system where they would bring a flip chart. And so they put a picture up of Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove and asked me, "Do you believe Joseph Smith saw God and Jesus?" And I said, "Of course I don't." They suggested that my husband and I have family prayer: we should kneel down together or across from each other and hold hands... I said, "Elders, are you giving me a lesson about religion or about sex?" So that wasn't going anywhere. Then, we got a new set of missionaries who I think were the sharpest missionaries I've ever met. They took no nonsense from me. They put me in my place. They'd drop by my house and play cards with me some afternoons! It was perfect.

During one visit, they said, "The next lesson will be on repentance." I, like anybody else, have a tremendous capacity to excuse my own wrongdoings so I thought, "Bring it on!" I'll have fun with these guys. But during the lesson, the missionaries started describing the process of repentance, and I stayed very

quiet. “If the whole world did this,” I thought, “the world would be a different place.” It was a very profound lesson for me. The missionaries challenged me to pray about it, and I gave them my usual answer that I didn’t believe in God. They said, “That’s like standing in front of an apartment building and saying no one lives on the tenth floor. You don’t know that unless you’ve rung the doorbell.”

After they left, my husband was sitting on the couch reading the paper and I was sitting at the table, and suddenly my life flashed before me—all of my wrongdoings, like a film. I turned around to Simon and said, “I need to tell you, I’ve lied to you many times.” I sat up through the night and wrote letters to people. I packed up all the books I had pinched from the library—they must have been very surprised at the library to get all these books back! The next morning, I was washing dishes and I started a prayer: “If you are there, God, you need to listen to me because I feel really awkward about this. I’m going to test this, because I really want to know. The reason I want to know is that I pride myself on living life fully. If you are there, I want to know because if there is a God, then I’m not living my life fully. Please, answer me. I am ready to know.” I knelt down and I said, “My Father in Heaven . . .” just like the elders had taught me. I felt this heat—like someone had poured hot honey all over me—on my head and then over my shoulders and in my chest. It was like someone put their loving arms around me. It was the most amazing thing. And it reminded me of when I was a very little girl and my grandma and grandpa would hug me and read me stories. I called again, “My Father in Heaven!” I was calling Him now, and I felt it again. I started asking questions about the Book of Mormon and having a testimony. That was early in the morning, so I called Zsazsa and woke her up. “I got it! I got it!” I yelled into the phone, “I got that testimony you keep on talking about!”

That evening, I told Simon, “I’m getting baptized. I got this testimony that they keep talking about, and I know that it’s true. So this is what you do to get one too: you kneel down, you say, ‘My Father in Heaven,’ and this is what you will feel. . . . So go, go go.” And I shoed him off into the bedroom. He went to

the bedroom, and comes back and says, “Nothing.” “Well, did you fold your arms just this way and bow your head?” “Yes.” “Go back and try again.” So he went back a second time and still nothing. So I said, “I don’t know what you are doing wrong, but this is what I felt and I know it’s true. If someone put a gun to my head and said deny it, I couldn’t.”

Simon said, “I’m going to get baptized with you because even though I didn’t feel the same thing, I trust you that something happened to you and the Mormons are good people.”

Our baptism was scheduled quickly, but before then we went to a fast and testimony meeting with Zsazsa and her husband, Don. That was a problem. Everyone was crying around. Afterward, Don asked what I thought. I said, “I’ll tell you what I thought. It was mass hysteria.”

The Sunday before we got baptized, it was stake conference and Elder Faust was presiding. Our friend Don was in the stake presidency and he announced, “Elder Faust would like some people to come up and bear their testimony.” My heart started getting hot, but I thought, “I’m certainly not going to get up there and cry around in front of all these people.” But Elder Faust was scanning the audience and pointed right at me. I stood up and went to the podium and cried and cried and shared my testimony with all those people. So much for the mass hysteria. Simon, being an Englishman, wasn’t crying along with me and afterward Elder Faust came up and put his hand on his shoulder and said, “Simon, I know how you feel.” And then Simon cried.

About ten days after we got baptized, we got a phone call from the bishop. “I’ve got a job with the Church,” Simon said after he hung up. “Excuse me?” I said. “I am the one with the testimony. How come they gave you a job?” “I’ll be the sports director.” “No, no. They know you don’t have a testimony, and they just want to keep you busy so you’ll keep coming. This is not an inspired calling.” So the next Sunday, I marched into the bishop’s office and I say, “This is not an inspired calling. He doesn’t have to be in this Church to kick a ball around. He can do that on the beach. So you need to think of something else where he can actually gain a testimony.” The next month, Simon was called to

be the Young Men president, and that's where he gained his own special testimony.

How about the relationship with your extended family?

It was a disaster. We sent a letter to my parents-in-law saying we had joined the Church. They sent a telegram back saying, "We beseech you not to join that sect." My father-in-law said, "I don't want you to bring the Book of Mormon into this house. I don't want you to talk about your church. I don't want you to pray in this house. And I don't want you to muck about in your temple with me when I am dead." He blamed me, the foreigner, for leading his son down this path to a cult. He felt Simon had been raised right, and I had ruined him. This went on for years.

We moved to Canada for a time after Brazil, and while we were there my father-in-law died. So we went to visit my mother-in-law. She lived far away from the closest church branch, and so my three little kids said, "Let's go to granny's church instead!" I had gotten married at the local Episcopal Church, and I'd taken them there so they knew about it. But before we went I told them, "You will go to the children's class at Granny's church. You don't say anything. If they say God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost are the same person, you don't say anything. We will discuss it later, and I will explain to you, but this is Granny's church and you don't talk there."

During the sermon, it just so happened that day that the minister spoke on the passage from Matthew chapter ten about how missionaries go two by two and shake the dust off their feet... And then he proceeded to talk about missionaries: they come, they knock on your door, they try to brainwash you, they talk about love but they don't really love you... All this stuff about other religions. I heard a voice say to me, "You need to bear your testimony to this man." I said, "No I don't! I gave my children strict instructions that they are not to say a word, and I'm going to bear my testimony?" Again I hear, "You need to bear your testimony to this priest." I felt the Spirit really strongly. People filed out, and the priest stood by the door saying goodbye to the people. My mother-in-law and I approached him. I walked past him and walked out of

the door. I stopped in my tracks and turned around. I said to him, “I am Mrs. Gordon-Smith’s daughter-in-law.” And his eyebrows went up and he said, “Ah, yes.” “I really liked the scriptures that you read, but I need to tell you I am a Mormon, and I believe that Christ is my Savior. I consider myself Christian.”

He said, “Well, my dear, I feel you’re sincere. But you really don’t believe in this Bible. You’ve got your own Bible.”

“I just felt I needed to tell you that I believe Christ is my Savior and that He is the Son of God. I’m sorry you’re not hearing me.”

I headed back to the car, where my mother-in-law was waiting, and I just felt she was going to let loose on me. Here it comes. She said, “May I know what you talked to the vicar about?”

“I told him that I know that my religion follows Christ, and that He’s my Savior and the Son of God.”

She was quiet for a minute, and then said, “You know, Rostya, I never thought I would tell you this, but I admire you for doing that. I could never stand up for my religion like you did.”

That afternoon, over lunch, she said, “I understand that you bless your food before you eat. Would you like to say a grace?” That night, I was kneeling beside the bed with the children and they said, “Let’s ask Granny to join us.” And she did join us. In fact, she said the Lord’s Prayer with me and the kids that night.

That’s why I had that prompting. It wasn’t for the darn vicar—it was for her, to change our family.

When I talk about conversion, the baptism was just the physical act of it. But the conversion of my mind and my whole being and my desires and my goals and values... those were a revolution in my life. The first revolution in my life was when I left home, and the second one was my conversion to the gospel.

I did have a third revolution. That was when I realized that people in the Church are not perfect. It took me quite a while to realize that. I was in a honeymoon period in the Church for a long time while I was living in Brazil. I really started having different eyes when I went to Canada and I got mixed

up with Americans. For me, the Church was church—it had no gender, it had no nationality. I loved everybody and everybody loved me because we were brothers and sisters.

And then in the mix of Canadians and Americans, it was American church. I remember fighting with somebody because they wanted to put up an American flag in the church on the Fourth of July. On Halloween, we would have Church Halloween parties. And I said, “Show me in the scriptures, show me in the manuals, where it says we have to celebrate Halloween at church.” I would even get rid of Santa Claus because it has no bearing at church. It’s not that I would be purist; I just did not like the penetration of these things.

Then I realized that there are two different things: there is a gospel and there is a culture, a folklore. For me that folklore is really dangerous because people begin to be sheep, and I don’t mean the sheep of Christ. Sheep in a sense that they are comfortable, and they go through the motions, and it seems they have blinders on. And then they become judgmental, intolerant. You have to fit a mold, in dressing, in speaking, in hairstyle. So there was a third revolution for me when I had to reconcile my testimony and my belief and figure out how to keep my faith pure.

What are the tools that keep your faith intact?

I learn for myself if things need to be essential parts of what I believe or if they’re not. For example, after we got baptized, we were surprised to learn about garments. We didn’t know about those before we got baptized. I was angry to learn about them. In Brazil, clothes under your clothes in the middle of summer? It seemed crazy. It really bothered me. I knew I wouldn’t go through the temple until I had a testimony of the garment. So I prayed and prayed. And one night I had a dream. I was taken up on the top of a busy street in our city in Brazil, and I was hovering over. A voice talked to me and said, “Look down. Do you see the lights?” I saw people walking below, and some people had light coming off of them. They were brighter than others. And I heard, “Those are people who wear the garments.” So when I need confirmation, I get it.

I very strongly believe that it's dangerous to blindly follow. I don't take my commitment lightly. Even though some things about the Church organization drive me nuts sometimes, I believe nowhere, no other organization, has people who so closely do what they say. As a group, we are strange. We've got righteous and unrighteous people, we've got liars and thieves... I have no illusions, no rose-colored glasses. But I think that as a group, we are the closest to doing what we say we believe. Our Church is an enormous movement for good in this world. I want to be a part of it.

A Better Doctor, A Better Christian

Ines Piñate | Santa Lucia, Venezuela

Interview produced by Neylan McBaine, translated by Luz Moronta
Originally published June 9, 2010

After serving a mission in her native Venezuela, Ines Pinate married another returned missionary, only to have the marriage end three years later in a divorce. Now, with an eight-year-old son, this single mother is attending medical school. In her interview, Ines expresses her love for her Heavenly Father and explains how being a doctor helps her be a better Christian.

How did you learn about the Church and gain a testimony of the gospel?

I knew about the Church through my older brother, who lived in another city at the time. I was around twelve years old when I knew that he was attending the Church. At that time, I did not have much contact with my brother. One day he invited me to go to his house and to the Church. When I visited

the Church, I liked it so much. I felt peace and I saw that it was different. My brother took me to the baptismal font and he said to me, “Sister, here is where I will baptize you.” At that moment, I did not understand him.

Then I came back home. I lost contact with my brother again. Later, he sent the missionaries to my home when I was twenty years old. That was when the missionaries started teaching me the gospel formally. I was not ready to accept the gospel, but everything they taught me I felt was true. I felt it and I knew it, even though I had not yet prayed and asked about the Book of Mormon. Those missionaries taught me and my family for one year. Finally, I was baptized on October 23, 1994. By that time, I had read the Book the Mormon. I prayed, and I got the confirmation that the Book of Mormon was true and everything that the missionaries had taught me was true. I had a testimony. My sister and I were baptized. So, we knew the gospel through my older brother. It was a long process in order to get baptized, but finally I did.

You served a mission soon after you joined the Church?

I served in the Barcelona Venezuela Mission from 1997 to 1999, after I had been a member of the Church for three years. It was my best experience. I feel like it was yesterday. Through my mission I got to know Jesus Christ. I could understand Him more. I lived experiences that I thought Jesus Christ might have had when He was teaching the gospel. I was so close to Him. At the missionary training center, I fulfilled all the rules that the president of the MTC said. If he said that I had to go to bed at ten o'clock, I did it. I obeyed everything. My Heavenly Father blessed me so much when I was on my mission.

I served a mission with a purpose, which was that my sister, who was so reluctant to the gospel, would accept it. I made a covenant with my Heavenly Father. I was going to serve a mission, but when I was done with my mission, I hoped my sister would join the Church. It was a personal covenant with my Heavenly Father. Every month I sent a letter to my sister with a scripture. A month before I finished my mission, I received a video on which was recorded the baptism of my sister. That was so exciting for me. It was so wonderful to hear the testimony of my sister. When I returned from my mission, I saw my



at a glance

Location: Santa Lucia, Venezuela

Age: 35

Marital status: single (divorced)

Children: eight-year-old son

Occupation: medical student

Schools attended: Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela

Languages spoken at home: Spanish

Favorite hymn: "Oh Say, What Is Truth?"

sister so strong in the Church. She was a great strength to me. I could see that our Heavenly Father fulfills His promises, if we fulfill our promises too. My mission was a good experience for all the people that I met, all those who I converted to the Church. But the greatest reward was to see my sister as a member of the Church.

Would you tell us about your marriage and your divorce?

I married eight months after I came back from my mission. I was twenty-three years old when I met the father of my son. He was a returned missionary too. He served his mission in Maracaibo, Venezuela. I met him at a single adult dance. He started a courtship with me. One year later we were married and sealed in the temple in Venezuela. After three months, I started feeling some difficulties in my marriage. I realized that my husband was doing things that were not right. I was so frustrated and disappointed about it. He started not to attend Church because he was more and more concerned about money. He started working on Sundays. He did not fulfill anymore his calling at the Church. He became inactive in the Church. I got pregnant three months after getting married. I was very sensitive to everything. I tried many times to ask him to go to church with me, but his heart started changing.

I was in that situation about three years. I told him that I had married him to be happy and to have a family. I shared my testimony with him. I told him that I wanted a man of God. I remember that it was a Sunday when I forced him to make a decision. I said to him, “If you won’t change your attitude, we can’t be together.” He made the decision to leave our house. He abandoned my son and me. He did not have more contact with his son. My son was one and a half years old when my husband decided to leave me.

I know marriage means two people, but I could not handle that situation anymore. Sometimes some members of the Church disagree with the idea of divorce, but I think there is a reason why divorce exists, especially if your marriage is hurting you so much.

Finally, he asked me for a divorce. He started living with another person. I meditated upon my marriage, if I should keep it or finish it. I decided to file for

the divorce. Now I think it was really a good decision because he hurt my feelings many times. He started to hate me. I think that my separation was something good that happened in my life. He always blamed me for his mistakes. He lost the communication with our Heavenly Father. It was the best decision that I made for me and for my son. I feel good now. I have peace, even though I haven't heard anything about him for a year. I am grateful to my Heavenly Father for giving me strength to keep going in my faith. My son is a happy kid, even though he doesn't have his dad next to him. My son is attending church and he is a good kid.

You are now a medical student at the Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela. Why did you decide to enroll in medical school after your divorce?

My mother advised me that the best thing for me to do after my divorce was to study, because if I stayed at home, I would get depressed. The new government in my country introduced a program that gave people without a lot of money the opportunity to enroll in medical school. In my hometown, there was an education school and a medical school. The degree in education was not very interesting to me, so I decided to study medicine. I study integral medicine, also known as family medicine, and I will be graduating next year.

How old is your son?

My son is eight years old now.

How do you find time to be with him while studying?

It has been a difficult challenge for my son. He always tells me that he doesn't like that I study medicine because I have to be on call some nights. I have to leave him with his grandmother. He has to sacrifice because I don't have as much time as I used to have before I studied medicine. The only time that I have to be with my son is the afternoons after work and Sundays when we go to church. Also, when we have our family home evenings and when we read the scriptures together. I always say to him that when I am done with my studies, we are going to make up all the time that we are not together now. I always hug

him, and we say beautiful things to each other. The most difficult thing about my studies is not having enough time to be with my son.

How does studying medicine help you be a better member of the Church?

To be a doctor is to be supportive, charitable, and honest. When you are a doctor, you have to live the things that you tell other people to do. For example, I cannot tell others not to smoke or drink if I am doing those things.

I feel that I help my fellow men with medicine because many of the patients come with emotional problems. I teach them the gospel indirectly through the medicine. For instance, the Word of Wisdom. I tell my patients there are things that are not healthy for their bodies. I teach this principle and I help them to live it. The education that I receive at medical school helps me to live with professionalism, ethics, and with truth.

All the principles that are taught at church I can apply in medical school. For example, the principle of honesty. I cannot lie in a diagnosis of a patient because it would bring a lot of consequences, and I would cause chaos. Another principle that I apply is to be a good example all the time. I need to be a good example for my patients. Service is another principle that I can apply in medicine. The principle of sacrifice: I give my time and, if it is necessary, I will give my own life to save others. I have to work as a team with a lead doctor and other coworkers in order to help others. I think all of this has helped me strengthen the principles of the gospel within myself. I like medical school because it helps me to be a better person and to be a better Christian.

How do you feel Heavenly Father guides you?

The communication that I have with my Heavenly Father is so special. I pray so much. When I sleep, I relate what I dream with the things that are happening in my life at that moment. Through the members of the Church and the scriptures, the Father answers my prayers. I think if I didn't have this kind of communication that I have with the Father, I would not be strong in

the Church. I feel that my Heavenly Father takes care of me and protects me. I know that He loves me, and I know that He wants me to look for Him.

What are some challenges of being a member of the Church in Venezuela?

There are many challenges. It is not easy to live the gospel in Venezuela. President Thomas S. Monson said recently in general conference that we are living in a world of perversity and iniquity. Venezuela in particular is a country in which it is difficult to live the principles of the gospel. For example, my co-workers live together with their partners without marrying because they think that marriage is not necessary according to the world. It is difficult for me as a single mother because men don't want something serious. Men don't believe that a single mother like me cannot just live together with them. It is a big challenge for me right now. I live the gospel. Men cannot understand that a woman like me who is thirty-five years old cannot have a relationship with them without marrying. Even though I teach them the gospel, it is difficult for them to change. I am alone. I don't have many friends. I cannot become friends with other members of the Church because I am so busy. This a great challenge for me at this moment.

What are the good things about being a member of the Church in Venezuela?

To have the truth in our lives is an advantage because it helps us avoid difficult situations. For example, in Caracas, Venezuela, there are many night places. We know as members of the Church that those places are not good to go to because they don't help us have the Spirit. Being a member of the Church helps us avoid those places and gather together in the right places. Even though Venezuela is a country that has so much violence, we are protected. We are in our homes or in right places.

Do you feel supported by the Relief Society sisters or ward members? Do you have support from your family members?

Thanks to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in this town, thanks to my family and to the sisters of the Relief Society, I can do what I am

doing right now. I am grateful for my bishop, who is a wonderful man; for the president of the Relief Society, who is my friend; and for my mother, who has been a great support for me in this moment that I live alone with my son. I am grateful to my Heavenly Father for everything that I have. The gospel is my great treasure. I know that the gospel is perfect, even though we live in a world of iniquity. There is a piece of heaven here. I have had the support of everyone here, which is why I can keep going.

The Heart of His Servant

Siu Man | Hong Kong

Interview produced by Grace Kwok
Originally published December 5, 2012

Siu Man has been a member of the Church in Hong Kong for about forty years. Despite a congenital heart defect that has kept her homebound for most of her life, Siu Man learned how to read from the Book of Mormon. Today, Siu Man serves her family by caring for aging family members, researching her ancestors, and sharing her handiwork crafts with others.

Tell us about your childhood sickness.

I was born and raised in Hong Kong, in a traditional Chinese family. I lived with my parents and my two older brothers. When I was only a few months old, my mother took me to the hospital for a body check because of my unusual health condition. She found that my lips and my fingernails were purple, and I looked pale all the time. When a baby looks like this, the mother is terrified.

Especially for my parents because they were not well educated. They did not know much about this type of sickness nor did other people during that time have much knowledge of heart disease. My mother was worried because she was not sure what was happening or what would happen to me. But having a “blue baby” was not something that Chinese traditional parents would expect.

She eventually took me to the doctor. After several appointments with the doctor and many tests, I was diagnosed with Tetralogy of Fallot, a congenital heart defect. With my parents’ educational level, they had no idea of the health problem that I had or what my life would be like, except for knowing that I had a rare kind of heart disease. They only knew that my blood vessels in my heart were not working in the right way, and I did not have enough oxygen in my blood.

Back in that time, heart surgery was something very serious and dangerous, and the success rate was low. My parents knew nothing about what to do with me. Instead of proceeding to do a surgery, my mother decided to keep me at home and take care of me. I was too young and did not understand the whole situation. When I grew up, I realized I was different from other people, and I started to learn of my health condition. Everything I did must be in a slow pace because if I rushed or just even walked a little faster than usual, I might have fainted or even died. I did not ask my parents for more details of my sickness because it was too complicated to them, and also to me. However, my sickness did not bother me much because I was too young to realize the seriousness of this heart disease, which is a good thing because I did not have to spend time worrying or terrifying myself with this sickness.

With this sickness, what was your childhood like?

As I mentioned before, my mother kept me at home and did not allow me to go outside. Occasionally I was allowed to go out under special circumstances. I lived in an old apartment complex in Hong Kong. Back in those days, buildings in Hong Kong, especially residential buildings, were usually built up to ten stories. Nothing like what you see in Hong Kong nowadays, with all the high-rises and skyscrapers. These old apartment complexes usually have

no elevator. In the building that I used to live in, there was no elevator. I lived on the seventh floor of my building, which means whenever you needed to go to the market, to the park, or just go outside for a walk, you had to go up and down by the stairs. It made it even more difficult for me to go outside. When I was a child, for every few steps I took, I had to stop every few minutes in order to keep my heart calm. Because once my heart pumps too fast, I might faint or die because there is not enough oxygen in my blood. For people with good health, climbing stairs to the seventh floor was an easy job, but for me, it was impossible to do.

This living condition was difficult for me, especially when I was in an emergency situation or in need of medical attention. Every time I needed to go out or go to the hospital for a doctor's appointment, my brothers would piggyback me up and down the stairs. They did the same when I needed to go outside. Without them, I would not be able to see the world or know what it was like outside my home. I seldom interacted with others, because I stayed home most of the time when I was young. Fortunately, I had some kind neighbors. They would come to my home and play with me. Life was simple back then; we did not have any fancy toys, computers, or television games. But having my neighbors visit was good enough for a child like me who was not allowed to go outside to play nor attend school. Their visits meant a lot to me. They made my childhood life happier and more colorful. Even until now, I still keep in touch with them, and they are still my best friends.

When did you join the Church? And how?

I was baptized when I was eleven years old. My brother was the first one in my family to learn of the Church. He later on got baptized and introduced me to the Church. When I first learned the gospel, I was very happy because I was able to have more interaction with others. Many people came and visited me and taught me about the gospel.

My problem was I did not know how to read or write because I did not receive proper education. I was kept home by my mother after they found out that I had a heart disease. I was not allowed to go to school and learn like other



at a glance

Location: Hong Kong

Age: 50+

Marital status: single

Favorite hymn: "Count Your Blessings"

children. I later on learned how to read and write from my friends and from attending evening school. When I was taught about the gospel, I knew that reading the scriptures was very important in gaining a testimony. However, I felt discouraged because I didn't even know how to read and write. I remember when the missionaries first taught me how to read the scriptures, I did not even know how to read "Nephi," the very first word in the first chapter of the Book of Mormon. My brother wanted me to learn the gospel, so he taught me how to read, especially the scriptures.

Later on, my brother went overseas for study, and I was left alone with my other nonmember family members. Before my brother left, he bought me a dictionary. With the dictionary and the help of other members, I started to learn how to read the Book of Mormon. Those members would come to my home and teach me reading and writing. They were very patient with me, and I could feel their love. I am grateful they were willing to teach me reading and writing so that I could learn the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From not knowing how to read at all to now reading the whole Book of Mormon, it is a miracle to me and it strengthens my faith from reading the scriptures. People around me witnessed this miracle also. To me, learning the gospel gave me hope. I was able to meet a lot of great friends in the Church, and they were willing to take care of me after my brother left. This was very encouraging to me. I felt God's love surrounded me. I decided to be baptized and joined the Church.

You had several major surgeries in your life. How have the gospel and your faith in Jesus Christ helped you overcome these difficult times?

When I was first diagnosed with this heart disease, the doctor told my parents that the successful rate of heart surgery was low. Also, the medical technology was not as advanced as what we have today. My parents' family did not agree to do the surgery, even though it might improve my health condition. However, they finally agreed to send me to the hospital to have my first major heart surgery when I was around nine years old. Since then, I have had four major heart surgeries in my life. They are all critical and dangerous. Following

each surgery, I had at least thirty or more stitches on my chest and stayed in the hospital for several months for recovery. Not all the surgeries were as successful as they were supposed to be, and I was fortunate to be alive after each surgery. But in general, my health did improve little by little after each surgery. Before every surgery, my doctor would explain to me the risk of doing the surgery and that I might even not be able to survive.

I remember when I was in my twenties, I had my fourth surgery. The medical technology was way better compared to when I was a child. The doctor planned to fix my blood vessels so that my heart could be “normal” again. They needed to open my chest once again for the surgery. My doctor told me that the chance of surviving was only half and half, but I had a peaceful feeling about this particular surgery. I asked for a priesthood blessing before the surgery. In the blessing, the brother did not even mention the surgery. I was a little bit puzzled and did not know how to respond. However, I was not too worried because I know Heavenly Father was mindful of me and of my health condition. At the end, the doctor did open my chest and checked inside. My heart structure and the blood vessels were too complicated, so they decided to just leave it as it was. Instead of complaining that the doctor opened my chest for nothing (opening the chest was a pain to a patient like me), I am indeed grateful that Heavenly Father watches over me.

I am grateful that even though my body is weak, Heavenly Father gives me a strong mind to overcome these challenges. My faith increases through these experiences. I never pity myself for having this heart disease, which has caused so many inconveniences in my life and to people around me. But I do not want to complain because I know that Heavenly Father is taking care of me. I am His daughter. He puts me in His hand. It is up to me to choose to be happy or sad, positive or negative. I choose to be happy and positive, whatever happens in my life.

I continue to serve and be an instrument of God.

Having heart problems might seem to be an obstacle in a person's life, but I try my best to find ways to be happy and serve others. When I grew up, and

after recovering from my major surgeries, my health condition was improving. I started to look for jobs and attend evening school. I wanted to be independent and tried not to rely on my family. I worked in a factory doing packaging in the morning. I enjoyed working because I learned so much from it. Also, I was able to meet new people in my workplace. At first my mother opposed my going to work because of my health condition, but I insisted on going. I know that I have to learn skills and earn a living in case I have to in return take care of my parents.

Besides working, I have a great desire to go to school after joining the Church and knowing how to read the scriptures. My brother who went overseas was the only one who supported me to go to school. I attended evening school at night. Since I have a little knowledge in reading and writing, I started the school courses in grade three. I love going to school. Attending evening school has allowed me to gain more knowledge and know the importance of education. Having a job and attending school were something that I had longed for in my childhood. I am grateful that I have enough strength to handle both.

Several years after my fourth surgery, my dad had a stroke and my mum's health was declining. At the time, I still had my part-time job. I remember I had to work and take care of my parents at the same time. I had to cook for them and make sure they were all right. When I was young, they took care of me, and it was my time to take care of them. They eventually passed away due to old age and illness. I felt that Heavenly Father saved my life so that I could take care of my parents. He gave me work to do in serving His children on earth. I am grateful that He gave me strength to my body so that I could have this responsibility to take care of my parents when they were getting old. I know that this is my mission in life.

While I was taking care of my parents, I was able to visit my ancestral home in China. Miraculously, I was able to find my family history. It was a thick and bulky book, with records of many of my ancestors who lived that long time ago. As some may know, keeping a family history book in China is very important to the family and the culture. The family history book means a lot to the Chi-

nese families because it is a symbol of preservation of family line and root. The family history book that I received has over three thousand names in it. I felt so blessed to have this family history book of my own family. After taking care of my parents and serving them until they died, my mission now is to take care of my ancestors. I enjoy going to the temple for ordinances on their behalf. I know that they are also watching over me so that I can continue to work on my family history. They are allowing me to serve them while I am still on this earth.

Besides serving my family, I also learned that it is important to serve others and be their friends. It is my dream to be a volunteer. I want to serve others because Jesus Christ teaches us to love one another. I try my best to serve as my health condition allows. One thing that I did over the years was handcraft work. I enjoy and love beading. I made little dolls, handbags, wallets, and many other things with plastic beads. I would do this handcraft work and make it as a gift for people I meet. Sometimes I do this for the elderly center or other non-profit organizations.

Besides this, I also do stitching. Currently, I am stitching the word “marriage” in Chinese and will frame it for a friend who just had her wedding anniversary. I know that I am not able to help people to move furniture when they move from house to house, nor will I be able to do any work that requires a lot of man power. But I am able to do small things like this, such as beading. I love to see the smiles on people’s faces when they receive my gift.

Sometimes I compare myself to others, especially those who grew up with me. Most of them are married, have children, or are successful in their career. I sometimes do think that they are better off than me. But when I look back on my life, I see that God is with me all the time. He watches over me and supports me in everything I encounter. I am forever grateful to have the chance to learn the gospel.

To me, I learned a lot in the Church and in the gospel. The gospel gives me hope. It was not easy for me to learn how to read, but I did it through reading the scriptures. From the scriptures, I learned that there are still works for me to do in this life. I learned to accept God’s will and continue to have faith and

hope. I am grateful that Heavenly Father gives me a strong mind, even though my body is weak, so that I am able to overcome the challenges in my life. I feel God's love every single day in my life. In return, I am willing to be His servant. I will continue to serve Him and His children with all that I can offer.

Producer Biographies

Cheri Andrus, Interview Producer

Cheri grew up in Southern California and graduated from BYU with a composite major in elementary education and child development. She met and married Brent Andrus while at BYU, and they have five children and ten grandchildren. Cheri taught elementary school for a short time and subsequently did some substitute teaching while raising her children. She owned and operated three Curves Fitness for Women clubs over a five-year period and particularly enjoyed teaching health and weight management classes. She and her husband recently served an eighteen-month mission to Rwanda as the first missionaries to serve there. She found their mission very rewarding as she worked with the special people. Besides spending time with grandchildren, Cheri enjoys reading, hiking, and photography.

Barbara Christiansen, Interview Producer and MWP Treasurer

A native of Denver, Barbara lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and toddler-aged daughter. She has a BA in English from Brigham Young University, an MBA from Oxford, and a master's in education from Harvard. She has worked as a strategy consultant for most of her career, both in the corporate and nonprofit sectors. She is obsessed with books and loves to travel, although she stays fairly close to home these days.

Lydia Defranchi, Interview Producer

Raised as a third-generation French Mormon, Lydia left for the United States at age eighteen to study broadcast journalism at BYU. There, she earned a national award for her reporting, then graduated and took a job as an anchor/reporter in wonderful and wild Wyoming. It's just she and her husband for now, but they look forward to starting a family.

Louise Elder, Interview Producer

A native of the UK, Louise holds a BA in drama and English from Middlesex University in London and achieved Gold Medal Standard with the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA). Her career was spent working as a senior executive assistant in a wide variety of industries, and she is currently working toward a diploma in personal development coaching. She resides in a charming English village outside of London with her husband and two young children. She enjoys European travel, delightful children's books, and serving in her local community.

Rosalyn Eves, Interview Producer and Copy Editor

Rosalyn grew up mostly in Montana and Utah. She has a BA in English from Brigham Young University and an MA and PhD in English (with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition) from The Pennsylvania State University, where she met her husband of nine years. Prior to finishing her BA, she served a mission in the Hungary Budapest Mission. She is currently a mostly-stay-at-home mother to three children (a seven-year-old son, a four-year-old daughter, and an infant son). She teaches the occasional English composition class and does editorial work for the provost's office at a local university. In her free time, she likes to watch movies with her husband, read, write, hike, and (sometimes) cook. She is also a regular contributor to the blog *Segullah*.

Krisanne Hastings Knudsen, Interview Producer

Krisanne hails from the delicious drizzle of Portland, Oregon, and now lives in American Fork, Utah, with her design-savvy husband. She has a BA in art history from BYU and an MA in art history from the University of York,

England. Her colorful and dynamic spiritual history includes her conversion to the Church at the age of eleven, as well as family members who are Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist, and Mormon. She is addicted to design blogs, is an incurable Anglophile, and loves teaching art to children at Brigham Young University's Museum of Art. She is devoted to supporting and empowering women within and without the Church.

Grace Kwok, Interview Producer

Grace has a BA in international cultural studies from BYU—Hawaii and an MA in literary and cultural studies from the University of Hong Kong. She grew up in Hong Kong and joined the Church in 2002. Before she attended BYU—Hawaii, she served a mission in the United States. She found out about The Mormon Women Project while she was working on her MA thesis on Chinese Mormon women. Grace loves spending time with her nieces and nephew.

Riley M. Lorimer, Layout and Copy Editor

Riley is an editor, writer, and sometime book designer, still living in her hometown of Salt Lake City, Utah. She received her bachelor's degree in English and editing from BYU and her master's degree in British literature from the University of Utah. In her day job, she works as an editor and designer for the Joseph Smith Papers Project. She lives with her husband in a much-beloved blue 1940s bungalow that she rescued from disrepair and they are continually improving. Riley is committed to helping women tell their stories.

Neylan McBaine, Founder and Editor in Chief

Neylan grew up Mormon in New York City and attended Yale University. She has been published in *Newsweek*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Segullah*, *The Washington Post*, *Meridian Magazine*, *Patheos*, *PowerofMoms*, and *BustedHalo*, among others. She is the author of a collection of personal essays, *How to Be a Twenty-First Century Pioneer Woman* (2008).

In addition to her work with The Mormon Women Project, Neylan is an associate creative director at Bonneville Communications, the agency responsible

for Mormon.org and the international “I’m a Mormon” video campaign. She lives with her husband and three young daughters.

Melissa McQuarrie, Copy Editor

Melissa has a BA and an MA in English from Brigham Young University, where she tutored in the writing center, taught freshman composition, and edited for *Inscape* and *BYU Studies*. She has published creative nonfiction in *Inscape*, *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Segullah*, and *Irreantum*. She works as a prose editor for *Segullah* and a copyeditor for The Mormon Women Project. After being raised in Australia and living in California as a teenager and twenty-something, she now lives in Provo, Utah, with her husband and four children.

Marintha Miles, Interview Producer

Marintha is currently a student in international studies and researches digital and social media trends in Central Asia, diaspora, and migration. She speaks Russian and English and is conversant in several other languages. She has been on the prose editorial staff of *Segullah* and blogs at *By Common Consent*. She is currently the media liaison for Chest of Hope, an organization that works to help victims of domestic violence.

Annette Bay Pimentel, Interview Producer

Annette has a BA in English literature from the University of California, Berkeley, and an MA from Brandeis University. She writes for children in places like *APPLESEEDS* and *Highlights for Children* and directs the local family history center. She and her husband have moved their family fifteen times in their twenty-eight years of marriage, including several years abroad in Europe and Africa. Annette now lives in rural Ohio with her husband and the youngest two of her six children.

Julie Davis Rodriguez, Copy Editor

Julie graduated from Brigham Young University with a BA in English and is currently working on an MBA. She served a mission in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where she developed a deep love for the Latin American culture. She now works

full time as an editor and also enjoys playing the piano, traveling, and running. She lives with her husband, Daniel, in Provo, Utah.

Lyndsey Payzant Wells, Interview Producer

Lyndsey is a marketing and public relations consultant, blogger, and stay-at-home mother. She honed her communications skills at PR agencies in Los Angeles and New York City and now provides consulting services for a number of social media clients and fellow bloggers. Lyndsey has a bachelor's degree in public relations from Brigham Young University and lives in Seattle with her husband and baby boy.

Acknowledgments

The Mormon Women Project would not be possible without the countless hours of a small army of volunteers. I extend my deepest thanks to each of the women who produced profiles in this book, but also to the dozens of others who have had interviews published on our website over the past three years. There have also been others who have hosted Salon events, spoken at our Salons, advocated for us at conferences, on blogs, and in articles, and freely opened their networks to us. Particular mention goes to Scott Lunt, one of the project's earliest and most devoted enthusiasts, who built our site and manages its upkeep. Mary Jane Callister created our logo, which continues to set us apart in its beauty and professionalism. Chrysula Winegar's wisdom makes her an invaluable sounding board, and her expertise in social media perfectly positions her to oversee our outreach efforts. This book wouldn't have happened without the abundant talents of Riley Lorimer. Her involvement was an answer to prayers.

I offer my personal gratitude to the Mormon woman who first inspired me, my mother, Ariel Bybee, and to my husband, Elliot Smith, who lives in a house full of Mormon women and somehow never tires of the subject.

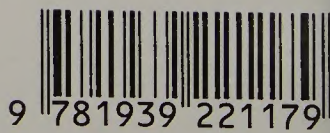
About The Mormon Women Project

The Mormon Women Project is a continuously expanding digital library of interviews with women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from around the world found at www.mormonwomen.com.

Founded in January 2010 and launched with eighteen interviews, the MWP recently published its 170th interview. A team of volunteer interview producers has featured women in twenty-two countries, from ages twenty-three to ninety-eight. The MWP tells the stories of women making righteous choices in a variety of life circumstances and locations. It celebrates women who have made deliberate choices— with the help of the Spirit and personal revelation— to overcome personal trials, magnify motherhood, contribute to communities outside their homes, or be converted to the gospel.



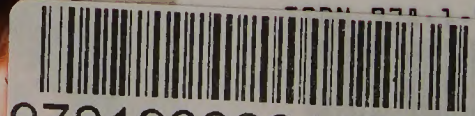
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“I learned that you should never label someone as merely one thing. We’re all so much more than that.”

-Sandra Turley



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