



We Are Just Not That Friendly

by Jason L | Jun 16, 2016 | Featured | 11 comments



I've come to a surprising realization recently. Mormons, it turns out, may not be very good at making friends.

I know you're already thinking of plenty of objections right now. You have lots of friends. Your kids have lots of friends. You live in a super-friendly (Mormon) neighborhood. When you moved your new neighbors (also Mormons) really made you feel at home.

I get that. But it also illustrates the problem. We're really good at making friends *with each other*, with our fellow active Mormons. But we have a lot of help in that regard. There are ward activities, programs for the youth and children, home and visiting

teaching, callings, potlucks, organized “compassionate service,” holiday parties, shared family home evenings, and Elders Quorum movers. On top of all of that, we spend three hours together each Sunday discussing our shared beliefs and values, including – sometimes – our deepest spiritual yearnings and experiences. In both behavior and belief, the Church provides TONS of opportunities to make friends within.

Unfortunately, one perverse consequence of all this may be that our personal friendship skills may atrophy. Without this structure and clear signals that we share beliefs, we struggle to cultivate friendships. I’ve noticed this especially since my wife left the Church and we moved to a new ward. Though plenty of people have expressed an interest in “getting to know her,” few have made any visible effort to do so. A visit from the RS presidency was much too formal and church-oriented. Other invites have come laden with incorrect assumptions about her availability and interests – based, as they are, on almost non-existent information. And, of course, they are all to church activities. They seem to be trying to reconvert her rather than get to know her.

When we moved in and met the family next door, a nice non-Mormon family, they told us the neighborhood was very quiet. Not unfriendly, but not friendly either. I suspect the ward members (which ARE the neighborhood) don’t think of themselves this way at all. They’re always busy doing things (mostly at the Church). But since most of their social lives are structured by the church, inviting non-Mormons is always a missionary effort.

In my experience, ‘missionary work’ has become our primary lens for viewing all our social interactions with those outside the Church. Which is a pity, because that becomes one more barrier to friendship. If the only ways we socialize are church-centered – including official Church activities, informal activities where everyone else will be members, or events where the Church will be the primary focus on conversation – we’re robbing ourselves of opportunities for broader friendships.

This is, of course, not only a problem for Mormons. Plenty of individuals (myself included) struggle with social skills. Plenty of communities struggle to reach out beyond their boundaries in meaningful ways.

Insularity is common. But insularity is also a sin.

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Matt. 22:37-39)

Love is active. If we’ve not actively loving our neighbors , we are failing to keep the

second great commandment. Like all commandments, this one will take some practice to get good at, to make it meaningful. But how wonderful would it be to both individually and collectively be great at the second great commandment?

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Jason L

Jason L grew up in Arizona as a Mormon Democrat with a lawyer father – and heard all



the jokes. Now he's got a Ph.D. in history, is married to a sugar sorceress, and enjoys raising their sweet son

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11 Comments



Matt on June 16, 2016 at 8:18 am

Probably varies by area, but I have noticed the same in my current ward.

I am in a position that allows me to interview members of the Ward. I often ask them what their favourite part part of the Ward is. They usually respond by saying people are down to earth and there are no cliques. When I ask them what their last favorite part of the Ward is they respond by saying they don't really have any deep friendships in the Ward and that they are not really socially integrated.

Both point towards the same attribute of the Ward – we lack deep relationships. Just about everyone is an acquaintance, not a friend.

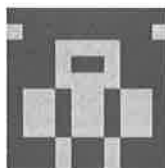
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Jason L on June 16, 2016 at 7:06 pm

I think you've observed a key paradox: On the one hand, all that shared experience and belief can be powerful in forging a broad friendship. On the other, if we only interact on that one plane, deeper friendships will be more difficult to come by. Any thoughts on what to do about that?

Reply



Arthur on June 16, 2016 at 12:38 pm

Probably depends on where you are located – truer behind the Zion Curtain than elsewhere. In most of the world you're the only LDS in your neighborhood and your social life doesn't revolve around the Church calendar.

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