BRIDGES

Ministering to Those Who Question

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Introduction

This book is about us—not about us and them. We are unified as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even though sometimes we may have differing kinds of faith. For some of us, our belief feels easy and complete. We believe all the principles taught in Church settings, have a strong testimony, and find deep meaning in Church teachings and doctrines. Others of us lack certainty but have confidence and hope in the gospel. And for some of us, our faith has changed, and we no longer believe as we once did—or even at all. Despite these differences, we are all Saints trying our best to find happiness and meaning in our lives and to be accepted and serve and love those around us.

I wrote this book primarily for those of us who believe, so we can better understand those of us who struggle to believe and those who struggle to maintain belief. A gap in understanding often separates believers and those classified as nonbelievers or doubters. When that gap is wide, it is more difficult to minister, show compassion, or mourn with those who mourn. As a result, those of us who don't believe as we once did suffer, experiencing loneliness and a sense of not belonging. But understanding why some of us have lost our faith helps to create a bridge and allows us to reach and minister to our brothers and sisters.

I have a strong testimony of our Heavenly Parents and our Savior Jesus Christ. From a young age I knew that they cared about me and knew who I was and what was in my heart. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been a natural part of my life. I try and base my life on the principles taught by the Savior, and although I have made my mistakes, I have peace knowing that the Savior's Atonement makes it possible for me to change and provides healing for those parts of me that are broken and sick.

I have family and friends who no longer believe in the doctrines that I hold dear. It hurts. I love them and want them to value what I believe and hope to be true. Because of these feelings, I have tried to understand why they no longer believe. I have asked them, listened to their reasons, studied social science, read religious history, and studied scripture and the words of our current Church leaders. I have conducted surveys of members, leaders, and those who no longer believe. I have read articles, books, and other material by Latter-day Saint writers, including Patrick Mason, Terryl and Fiona Givens, Adam Miller, Bruce and Marie Hafen, and others.[1] Many of

the works I've read are directed to those who are currently experiencing a crisis of faith. This book, on the other hand, is for those who in one way or another strive to minister to those who are struggling with belief.

In this book, I use the term *faith crisis* to describe the state of dissonance and distress that some may experience regarding their belief in the Church and its teachings due to some sort of traumatic church event—including discovering new information about the Church that conflicts with their own understandings, disagreeing with a Church policy or doctrine, or having a difficult encounter with a Church leader. The usual result of such a crisis is the loss of faith in some or all of the foundational truth claims of the Church. Often the person who experiences a faith crisis was a fully believing member, a temple recommend holder, a returned missionary. They are thrown into disarray, completely unsure what they believe.

In the course of writing this book, I talked with a bishop who encountered the effects of a faith crisis during his first year of conducting tithing settlement interviews. Meeting with a stalwart couple, he thanked them for their service. In response, the couple awkwardly said, "Bishop, we have decided to leave the Church." The bishop was shocked. He had no idea that they had been struggling with their belief; it was a faith crisis that had triggered their decision. They, their children, and all their future descendants were now alienated from the Church. Their decision to leave may have caused those they served or served with to also question the Church.

I began studying the root causes of why people no longer believe while I was serving in a calling in our stake. Working under the direction of our stake presidency, my wife and I served for eighteen months as Church service missionaries. Our calling was to work with the almost one thousand singles in our stake. (This assignment excluded those in the local single wards, since they were in other stakes.) About 80 percent of our stake's singles were not attending church. We sent a letter to each of the nonattending singles, asking them to tell us why they weren't attending. They could complete an anonymous online survey, call us, or send us text or email messages. We told them we wouldn't preach to them; we just wanted to listen and to better understand why they no longer attend. Although the response rate was low, we learned that many felt that Church leaders didn't understand their concerns and situations. Combined with external research, we brought this information back to stake and ward leadership to help them in their ministering efforts. We realized that there are few resources available to local leaders to systematically understand Latter-day Saint disaffiliation, nonattendance, and loss of belief.

To augment our locally collected data, in May 2018 I conducted the *Local Leader Survey*[2] to better understand stake and ward leaders' perceptions of why people stopped believing. In September 2018, I conducted the *Faith Crisis Member Survey*,[3] this time of members who identified as being in a faith crisis. These surveys were not done in our stake, but nationally, with even some international responses. In addition, I created the *Faith Crisis Member Focus Group*[4] where I could lead discussions on aspects of Latter-day Saint faith. I also interviewed about forty members and local leaders about faith crises and their experiences. I use many of their stories and comments in this book. Through all this research, I came to four major conclusions:

1. Ward and stake leaders could better understand members experiencing a faith crisis. Leaders frequently lack insight into both the issues leading to faith challenges and the pain, loss, and isolation these faith challenges can produce. This lack of understanding makes it more difficult for leaders to help members who are struggling to believe.

2. Ward and stake leaders recognize the need to address faith challenges but say they would value training on *how* to address them. They often have no tools or training to minister to those with faith challenges.

3. Because we as members and local leaders frequently don't understand these challenges, Church members experiencing a crisis of faith are largely unwilling to share their concerns and often appear to their families, ward members, and ward leaders to be completely believing. This can make it difficult to recognize how common faith challenges are among members.

4. Because leaders, members, and family members lack understanding of those facing faith challenges, members working through a faith crisis often feel unnecessary pain and disconnection. They work through their faith crisis alone, without an understanding and helpful minister by their side. If they do share belief concerns with others, they are often met with defensiveness, criticism, or judgment. Feeling isolated and unwelcome, many leave completely.

This last point may be surprising—at least it was to me. Many of us think about the pain we feel when a loved one no longer believes. I have certainly felt it. But as I talked with those who no longer believe, I learned that they also feel a great depth of pain. The issues they face sometimes challenge everything they have ever believed, turning their entire world upside down. Their

faith crisis threatens their relationships with family members and sometimes (especially in the American Intermountain West) with their colleagues at work and with those in the community. In some cases, the reaction of leaders, Church members, and family members to their faith crisis inadvertently pushes them further away, making it harder for them to participate in the Church at all. Some become angry and bitter. Some reject it all.

We can't control how others feel, nor should we try, but by better understanding these faith challenges, we can more effectively minister and show love. Building a bridge requires humility and openness; we must open ourselves to the people we are trying to understand and put ourselves in their shoes, sincerely trying to see their perspective. Building a bridge means that we listen—not to formulate the perfect response, but to empathize, comfort, mourn, validate, and love. Building a bridge requires vulnerability, because our efforts may not always be reciprocated—there may be no one else building the other side of the bridge. But we keep learning and trying because of our love for them and our love for our Heavenly Parents.

At the Waters of Mormon, Christ's followers were baptized and promised that they would mourn with those who mourned and comfort those who stood in need of comfort (Mosiah 18:8-11). Without striving to understand the underlying reasons why people stop believing, we can't express the full love of our Savior and comfort them and mourn with them. This is why I decided to write a book for believing members—to help us better understand how to show compassion and love and to preserve relationships with those who struggle with their faith.

Bridges are meant to be crossed back and forth. While our efforts may seem in vain at times, building a bridge of compassion and understanding preserves our relationships and gives us a pathway for showing our love. Although we hope that those who have left will find belief again, we understand that may not happen, and yet we still build our bridge by working to understand. That bridge allows us to feel and express empathy and love, "that [they] may know that [our] faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death" (D&C 121:44).

My education and career were spent using data to improve the effectiveness of healthcare. I learned that the best decisions are those that are informed. So at times in this book, I will step back from my personal feelings and look at data from the best sources I can find, including external research by sociologists, research I have personally conducted, and analyses by professionals in religion, history, and philosophy in order to provide an objective, dispassionate, and at times unsparingly honest view of current

challenges those in the Church are experiencing. Truly understanding the matters affecting faith requires a frank and honest discussion; without it, we may gloss over these issues and rationalize away their significance.

As I have read other authors on this subject, I have sensed that many have felt the same conflict—a conflict between a desire to be honest about the things that challenge faith and a desire to not discourage faithful members. We may worry that talking about difficult issues will give some in the Church reason to stop believing. I believe, however, that when we directly talk about difficult issues, not only do we increase our understanding, but we also better see how God's work moves forward. For example, when we directly and honestly confront challenges of our past, including our mistakes, we gain greater insight into and appreciation for the perfection of our Savior and God's mercy in having us, full of limitations, be coworkers in His work. Openness gives us opportunities for new insights, helping our faith grow. In this book, I have chosen to address challenging issues directly to help us build faith and confidently address these subjects with our families and friends and those we have stewardship over in our leadership roles.

For two people to communicate effectively, they need to use words the other understands. The Book of Mormon tells us that the Lord speaks "according to their language, unto their understanding" (2 Ne. 31:3). The Latter-day Saint historian and author Richard Bushman writes,

> Words are our entry into another culture. They are the way we make ourselves intelligible in a strange land. They not only allow us to connect, but to make ourselves understood. They show respect. We are making an effort to communicate in a way that can be understood. If we insist on using standard church language, we are in effect declaring our indifference.[5]

I have written this book using words that will hopefully be understood, that are meant to help the reader enter the culture of those who have stepped away from the Church. They think and feel differently than they once did, and because they are different than they were before, they often hear words differently.

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This book is divided into three sections. Section 1, "A Crisis of Faith," discusses why many of our members are experiencing a crisis of faith and how changes in society have created a unique environment in which people, including those raised in the Church, are leaving the faith of their youth, perhaps more than at any other time. I share stories and data that

illustrate the reasons behind this occurrence. Section 2, "Trust, Belonging, and Meaning," illustrates that unbelief largely stems from one of three reasons (or sometimes all three): losing trust in the Church or its leaders, not feeling a sense of belonging in the Church community, or not finding meaning or relevance in the doctrines of the gospel. Section 3, "Ministering," outlines the principles by which members and leaders, in both their families and wards, can build trust, create belonging, and help ourselves and others find meaning in Church doctrines and the gospel. By following these principles, we can create an environment that will help us retain and develop a stronger and more durable faith. All of the suggestions in this book are within the bounds of current Latter-day Saint standards of practice, as outlined in the Church handbooks, the teachings from our general leaders, and the scriptures.

I have deep spiritual feelings about these issues. They affect my family and those I love; they have caused me more sleepless nights, moments of pleading with my Heavenly Father, and anguish than any other event in my life. I am deeply committed to the Church and its powerful Christ-centered teachings, and I love the way members can change their lives by following Christ and the Church's teachings. And it's because of this commitment that I want to find a way to help all of us minister to those who are struggling with their faith. If you are a believer, I hope that reading this book will help you build your bridge with better understanding as you minister to those who doubt. If you consider yourself a doubter or nonbeliever, I pray that reading this book will give you hope that we are trying to be more understanding and that your relationships with family members, friends, and Church members can be strong and rich, even with differences in belief. Perhaps this book will help you find belonging and meaning, even without your former belief.

Without bridges we can't cross the gaps that divide us and we are unable to experience new lands and experiences. The Atonement is the eternal bridge that makes it possible for us to return to our Heavenly Parents. And that bridge is only possible because the Savior took upon Him all our sins and infirmities that He might know us and heal us (Alma 7:11; 3 Ne. 9:13). Because of His Atonement and with His help, we can also come to truly know our sisters and brothers and be His hands in bringing healing to those around us, succoring the weak, lifting up the hands that hang down, and strengthening those with feeble knees (D&C 81:5).

SECTION 1

A CRISIS OF FAITH

Our day is a day of unparalleled change. This is not just in the rapid pace of technology or inventions, the way we consume and access information, or the dynamic way our relationships have evolved. The change seems to be to life itself. We see it in our jobs, in the fields we have studied, and in politics. It's also in how we interact with one another, through electronic messaging and social media. The change is in society and in our relationships with families and our friends. And perhaps more significantly for Latter-say Saints, these changes affect how we think about God, religion, and our spirituality. Today is a different day.

CHAPTER 1

A Different Time

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.
—Henri Nouwen[1]

Almost all of us have a family member or close friend who was raised in the Church but, as an adult, no longer believes.[2] Having an authentic and loving relationship with these individuals means we must better understand what they are going through so that we are able to comfort and mourn with them as they struggle through a faith crisis. That is why we must build a bridge of understanding—so that we can show our love and compassion. When engineers design a bridge, they study the geology and subsurface conditions of the area, design a foundation, select the building materials, and create the supports that will bear the load between the two sides. Likewise, we begin our study by analyzing today's faith terrain so that we can understand the load that our bridge must carry.

People Leaving the Church in the United States Today

Many have sensed that persons leaving organized religion is a growing trend in the United States, even among those in the Church. Although we may be aware of the overall decline in religion in the Western world, we may wonder how that trend applies to the Church specifically. Available official Church data don't answer this question since membership records capture overall membership numbers but do not measure whether someone with a membership record still identifies as being a member of the Church.

Fortunately, there are surveys and sociological data that shed light on the current situation of religion, and of the Church in particular. In this book, I use data from Darren E. Sherkat (a professor of sociology who studies religion-related topics),[3] the Pew Research Center,[4] and recent studies done by Latter-day Saint scholars Jana Riess and Benjamin Knoll.[5] These resources are insightful and helpful to understanding the challenges

of creating a durable faith in today's world and to responding to Latter-day Saints who no longer believe or practice in a traditional way.

In 2014, Sherkat published his analysis of religious affiliation for major religions within the United States, including Latter-day Saints. He identifies three measures that point to an increasing number of people leaving their faith:

1. **Religious loyalty**: the rate at which adults keep the religion they had when they were sixteen.

2. **Religious apostasy**: the rate at which adults leave the religion they had when they were sixteen and who presently have no religion.

3. **Gains and losses from switching**: a measure of the overall change in membership numbers, adjusting for converts coming in and those who leave.[6]

All denominations that Sherkat studied show similar trends, but they are more pronounced for Latter-day Saints: "Mormons . . . have high rates of loyalty in generations born before 1971, but in the youngest cohorts, loyalty drops to 61% and ranks Mormons among the least loyal groups in the youngest generation."[7] In that younger age group, Latter-day Saints have the highest rate of religious apostasy and the largest net loss from switching of any studied religious groups.

Religious Loyalty, Apostasy, and Overall Change Among Latter-day Saints

	Birth Years				
	Before 1925	1925–43	1944–55	1956–70	1971–94
Religious Loyalty	75.8%	74.2%	72.4%	71.2%	61.2%
Religious Apostasy	4.8%	5.8%	9.7%	17.6%	27.1%
Gains and Losses from Switching	29.0%	25.0%	21.0%	2.0$	-28.0%

According to Sherkat's findings, adult religious affiliation among those raised in the Church and who were born between 1971 and 1994 is dramatically different than that of prior generations. They are much more likely to no longer identify as Latter-day Saints (or with any other religious institution). For this age group, the Church has not been able to attract enough converts to replace those who are leaving, with a net outflow of 28 percent.

Riess took Sherkat's raw data and reanalyzed it. She found that for millennials (those born between 1981 and 1994) religious loyalty drops to 46 percent. The sample size is small, however, and therefore we should

be cautious about its interpretation.[8] Sufficient data hasn't been collected yet that would allow us to study those born after 1994.

The Pew Research Center supports these conclusions with its recent study of US religions. In 2007, they found that 70 percent of those raised in the Church identify as Latter-day Saint as adults. In 2014, that number dropped, with only 64 percent of those raised in the Church identifying as such.[9] This is a substantial decline. With a large margin of error, Pew's data indicates that an estimated 360,000 adults left the faith between 2007 and 2014 in the United States.[10] That translates to about twenty-five members of each congregation.

Knoll and Riess studied members of the Church and identified that the age of disaffiliation has decreased with each of the last three generations. They reported:

> We can also briefly take a closer look at what age former Mormons tend to disaffiliate from their Mormon identities. Former Mormons were asked: "About how old were you when you stopped identifying as a member of the LDS Church?" Among all former Mormon respondents, the average age is 21. This does not vary much by age cohort, though there appears to be a trend for disaffiliation at younger ages: the average age of de-identification for former Mormons who are currently Millennials is 18.4, Generation X is 21.1, and those of the Boomer or Silent generation is 23.7. Clearly young adulthood is the age when most former Mormons leave the fold, regardless of what age they are now.[11]

Data from Church records show a slowing growth of Church membership in the United States because of declining birth rates and lower numbers of converts. Since 2007, congregational growth has also slowed; between 2007 and 2016 in the United States, membership increased 12.2 percent, but the number of wards and branches increased only 7.7 percent, implying a decline in activity.[12]

While these statistics are sobering, more important than these trends are the brother, daughter, spouse, or friend who no longer believes. They aren't a statistic—they are people we know and love. Whenever even one person leaves the Church, while respecting their choice, we rightly mourn. We are sad that those who leave don't see the meaning we do in the gospel's teachings. We are sad that they couldn't trust Church leaders, that they felt unwelcome, that their questions were not heard—that they feel the Church somehow failed them. We are devastated.

The terrain of faith today is different than it once was. Our bridge often fails and needs to be stronger to be able to carry heavier loads. Throughout

our history, belief in God has been almost universal and, at least in Western society, almost everyone used to affiliate with a religion. But because of broad societal and generational changes, it's now different. Many are spiritual but not religious, and many just don't believe in God at all.

Everyone is different, and there is no single reason why someone who previously expressed a strong testimony in God, the restoration of Christ's Church, and prophetic leadership loses those beliefs. We live in a different time, which means we need to reexamine our thinking on why and how we should respond. Throughout this book, I will share with you real stories of people who have left the Church, of those who don't know what they believe, and of leaders and members who are trying to build a bridge to help those who doubt. I don't soften these stories. Some of them are hard to read and reflect the deep feelings involved. When I share these stories with other members of the Church, I find that some become defensive, dismiss the individuals' concerns as insignificant, or rush to explain away the concerns. I used to do that myself, but I have learned to listen, to better understand, and to have empathy. I have learned so much and as a result find myself better able to relate, love, and minister to others than I was once able to. I like the words of Stephen Covey, who wrote about the importance of listening. He says, "If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: Seek first to understand, then to be understood."[13] As you read these stories, remember the promises that were made at the Waters of Mormon to mourn with those who mourn and comfort those who stand in need of comfort. Even though we may not know these people personally, we can still imagine putting our arms around them and expressing the love that we know our Heavenly Parents feel for each of their children.

Not Just a Statistic: Personal Stories[14]

Mike

Mike is thirty-five and was raised in a caring Latter-day Saint home with wonderful parents. In his words, "I grew up in the Church in a very loving home. Mormonism was a huge and defining part of our family. My parents are so amazing. To say I grew up active in my youth is kind of an understatement." He recalls a night when he was fourteen years old and reading the Book of Mormon as a part of a seminary assignment: "I just felt so pumped and good about it and turned to my brother and said, 'You

need to read this, it is amazing.' It was the first time that I felt God in the Book of Mormon."

He served a mission to a foreign country and described the experience "as the best thing he has ever done in his life." He felt that he was a successful missionary in terms of doing the work, following the rules, and feeling close to God. His leaders must have thought he was a trustworthy and faithful missionary since he was called to serve as a leader and was the assistant to the mission president for the last seven months of his mission.

He married in the temple within a year of returning home, and together, he and his wife founded their family in the gospel. He completed his education, established his career, served in Church callings, and appeared to have the typical and ideal Latter-day Saint family—temple marriage, four kids, successful career, and full activity in their ward.

About two years ago, Mike's brother told him that he no longer believed in the Church. Mike loved and trusted his brother, knew that he was a good person, and wanted to better understand his concerns. For about a year, Mike researched his brother's concerns, starting with issues about Church history. Even with all his previous gospel study, Mike had never heard that Joseph Smith had introduced and practiced polygamy and polyandry, that he used a seer stone when translating the Book of Mormon, and that modern-day translations and analyses of the papyri used to create the Book of Abraham do not correspond with the text of Joseph Smith's translation of them. Mike studied Church-produced materials, including the Gospel Topic Essays and other materials from Church scholars, and he learned how others had dealt with these often-unknown historical events. Throughout his research, he avoided reading ex-Latter-day Saint blogs and articles.

Speaking of this period of struggle, Mike said, "I had never read so much, prayed so much, and fasted so much." Prior to this time, he had been a dedicated member who defended, served, and sacrificed for the Church. During his crisis of faith, he began to feel that everything he stood for might be wrong. He described this period as a time of terrible loneliness, when what he was learning was reshaping everything he believed in—his entire foundation of faith. He felt he couldn't talk to anyone about his struggles, which was agonizing. He would sometimes muster the courage to talk to someone, but when he finally broached the subject with them, he would get shut down. He felt alone and isolated and sometimes angry, in part because so many of the things that he had held dear now seemed dead—he was going through a grieving process. When

he described his anger during this period, he mentioned his anger with himself—he felt that he had given all his moral authority to his Church leaders. He was angry with an entrenched Church culture that didn't seem to listen to people who were different.

Mike remains a spiritual person and believes the Church has a lot to offer, but everything has changed for him. He believes God and Christ are real—a belief he says is beautiful and comforting—but acknowledges that he may be wrong. He no longer believes that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the only true church or that he can tacitly trust general Church leaders without reservation or suspicion. He does, however, still believe that the Church is a good place to learn about God. He still attends church meetings on Sundays and keeps the commandments, but he misses the connection he once had with Church members because of their shared doctrine and belief.

Though he attends church weekly, Mike doesn't feel he can fully express his feelings to his ward members and friends. He recently taught a lesson in Elders Quorum about ministering to those who go through a faith crisis. He didn't raise any controversial issues but was authentic about some of his feelings. He felt that his lesson was not well-received and that he would likely not be asked to teach again. Despite these feelings of loneliness and not belonging, Mike is trying to figure out how he fits into his ward community and trying to connect to people through love and service.

Three weeks before my interview with him, Mike started reading the Book of Mormon again. He feels direction in it but doesn't believe in it the way he did prior to his faith transition. During our one-hour conversation, he told me, "It feels so good to be able to tell someone your story and have them just listen. For some people, if you can share your story and walk away from that conversation knowing the person loves you, it can be lifesaving. Because it can be a very dark place sometimes."

I left the conversation in tears.

Because we are taught the importance of daily personal spiritual activities—like praying and scripture study—to insulate us from spiritual challenges, we may be conditioned to rationalize Mike's experience away. We are prone to assume that his loss of traditional faith is due to him not reading his scriptures regularly, not saying his personal prayers, or that maybe there was some secret sin that caused him to lose the Spirit. Without attempting to understand him, we might just view and label him as a tare that is a part of the latter-day separation (Matt. 13).

If we dismiss Mike's story and assume some other explanation for his change in belief, we lose the opportunity to learn from his experience and to find ways to love, understand, and minister to him and people like him. I believe that Mike's story is sincere. His family and leaders all helped build his faith exactly as we would have hoped; he was active as a youth, had a strong testimony, served valiantly as a missionary, married in the temple, attended Church regularly, and served faithfully in the Church as an adult. And yet, somehow he ended up in crisis, alone, angry, and terrified of what he had learned. His bridge of belief was gone, and there was no one there to help.

Amanda

Amanda's story is similar to Mike's. She had the ideal Latter-day Saint upbringing, full of faith, testimony, and service. She served a mission and married in the temple. She has four children, and when I interviewed her, she was thirty-four. While detailing her past activity in the Church, she underscored her devotion, telling me, "It's hard to overstate how 100 percent in I was as a youth and young adult. I was so passionate and excited about the gospel and to be a member of the Church." Amanda described her testimony as a bundled package of several truth claims, including Joseph Smith as a prophet, the Book of Mormon as divinely translated scripture, modern prophets as spokespersons for God, and the Church as the only true and living restored Church of Jesus Christ.

Amanda believes she was taught that avoidance was the best way to deal with difficult issues. This message wasn't always overt—no one taught her a lesson on how to avoid difficult issues—but it was communicated culturally as others around her avoided difficult questions and discouraged unorthodox points of view. She was, however, explicitly taught to avoid anti-Mormon literature because of its corrupting influence. Thus, in order to be faithful, she put difficult issues on a shelf to be dealt with later. In hindsight, she recognizes that one of her first concerns developed when she was a Beehive and first learned about the race prohibition of the priesthood. That policy felt wrong, but she placed it on her shelf. Over time her shelf was soon occupied by other issues she encountered as a youth and into adulthood.

Two years ago, her shelf broke, and over a long period of reading, studying, praying, and ultimately grieving, she came to believe "that she could not reconcile certain doctrines and attitudes within the Church that

were required of me to participate." She believes in God and a Savior, but not in one true Church. Yet she still wants to find love and grace. With her husband, she teaches her children about love, relationships, and goodness.

Amanda doesn't desire to deconvert anyone. She doesn't try and convince anyone else to see things the way she sees them. She knows that the Church blesses some lives and is grateful for the meaning and direction it provides members, especially her parents. She wishes we could give that meaning and direction back to her. She isn't willing, however, to go back to the time when she didn't look critically at her spirituality and her relationship with God.

One reason Amanda wanted to talk with me was because she sees her relationships as the most precious things in her life. Her faith transition has impacted, and at times harmed, almost all her relationships with her family and church-going friends. She is hopeful that by sharing her experience, she can help leaders and members understand how to create accepting and loving relationships with those around them, even if they have different beliefs.

The strained relationship that has caused Amanda the most pain is the relationship with her parents. Before she had her faith crisis, her mother told her that having a child leave the Church is the worst thing that could ever happen to her. She knows they are devastated because they believe, based on Church theology, that her leaving the Church will affect their relationship in eternity. She wants her parents to still trust that she is a good person, that she is still led by and connected to God, and that she will teach her children to love, be kind, and follow God. But she still feels their disappointment and reflects that perhaps it was asking too much for them to be proud of her. Toward the end of my interview with her, with tears, she asked for advice on what she could do. "It's been really hard. I want to have that relationship back."

The tissues were out again. I have children who don't believe—do they believe that about me? Have I done anything that would cause them to think I don't accept them or have confidence in them and the course they choose? Have I failed to reach out in a way to let them know how proud I will always be of them? I want them to know that no matter what they do or believe, I will love them completely and without reservation. I want to—I try to—even though my beliefs are different.

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Most all of us have a brother, sister, adult child, or close friend who no longer believes or attends Church. Many are like Mike and Amanda, who served missions, were married in the temple, and served faithfully in their wards for years. These are just two stories from the dozens of people I have interviewed. Although the people I spoke with come from all ages, backgrounds, and experiences, there are a few common threads that appear throughout their stories: Many question the nature of the Restoration or prophetic leader, others feel that the culture of the Church is not welcoming and that people are judgmental, and some just no longer connect with the teachings and doctrines of the Church.

My experience listening to people explain why they no longer believe as they once did has led me to believe we need to examine how to build faith to be enduring, particularly addressing these fundamental challenges:

- There are difficult issues in the history of the Church that we are often tempted to avoid, considering them either unimportant or too dangerous to discuss. When these issues are discovered, members sometimes lose trust in the Church's leaders because they feel the Church has hidden or manipulated parts of its history.

- Although we recognize the limitations of our leaders, we often place them on an unrealistic pedestal. Believing that they receive clear and definitive revelation, we are sometimes inclined to delegate our decision-making to them. As a result, when some Church members realize their leaders may have made mistakes, they lose their belief and trust in these leaders.

- Our Church community often provides no faithful place where we can discuss these historical issues or other troubling topics. Members with doubt feel isolated and may look outside the Church for answers.

- We sometimes blame the person who has doubts and believe they have done something wrong to trigger the loss of faith.

- There are members who are active in the Church and outwardly appear to be completely believing, yet they silently struggle with their faith, lacking confidence that they will be met with compassion and understanding if they raise or try to discuss their concerns.

Ministering to Those Experiencing a Crisis of Faith

In May 2018, I conducted the *Local Leader Survey*, a survey I administered with LeadingSaints (www.leadingsaints.org), an online platform providing tools to help Latter-day Saint leaders. I asked stake and ward leaders to respond to 135 statements about their own faith and about the faith challenges they see in their wards and stakes. I received 514 qualified responses, 48 percent from women and 52 percent from men. The respondents were of a wide range of ages and geographic representation, including 13 percent from outside of the United Status. The results of the survey are shown here.

Do You Have People in Your Circle That Have Had or Are in a Faith Crisis?
(*Local Leader Survey*)

	Many	Few	One/Two	None
Child	64.4% - At least one child			35.6%
Immediate family member	12.2%	26.6%	32.0%	30.1%
Extended family member	17.2%	41.6%	22.4%	18.9%
Close friend	14.1%	43.9%	28.1%	14.3%
Any family member or friends	97.0%			3.0%
In your ward	22.9%	53.7%	18.5%	4.4%
In your priesthood or auxillary organization	12.1%	39.8%	22.4%	25.3%

According to this data, 64.4 percent of current local Church leaders in the United States have at least one child who has experienced a faith crisis. Among these leaders, over 95 percent knew of someone in their ward who experienced a faith crisis, indicating that leaders would likely greatly benefit from more training on how to minister to those experiencing challenges to their faith. And an astounding 97 percent know a friend or family member who has experienced a faith crisis, further emphasizing that this concern touches us all. I would love to go back in time and ask this question twenty or forty years ago. I suspect the data would be very different. In the 1990s, I served as a bishop and stake president. During that time I ministered to only a few people considering leaving the Church. We face a different challenge today.

Here are the results to another question:

How Important Do you Think It Is to Address Faith Crises in These Settings?
(*Local Leader Survey*)

	Very Important	Important	Unimportant
In church generally	67%	31%	1%
In my stake	60%	37%	3%
In my ward	65%	33%	2%
In my priesthood or auxillary organization	64%	32%	5%
In my family	76%	21%	3%

Based on the answers given to the first question—which indicate that knowing someone who has experienced doubt is near universal—it is not surprising that only a few believe that addressing faith crises is unimportant. And while over 67 percent of Church leaders surveyed felt that addressing faith crises in Church was very important, the highest percentage of respondents, at 76.2 percent, pointed to the family as a very important setting in which to address faith challenges. Given our love for our families and the Church's teachings on the sacred nature of the family, it is unsurprising that we seem to be most sensitive about faith within our families than within any other organization.

I also asked questions about whether leaders think they are receiving training about faith crises or have confidence in their or their ward's ability to minister to those in a faith crisis. Here are the findings:

Rate Each Statement about Faith Crises
(*Local Leader Survey*)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Church as a whole provides adequate information for leaders to help people who are in a faith crisis.	9.7%	43.4%	36.2%	10.7%
Our stake and ward provides training to leaders about faith crises.	1.6%	13.5%	55.8%	29.1%
My ward leaders know how to effectively minister to individuals in a faith crisis.	1.4%	25.1%	55.2%	18.4%
I feel that I can effectively help a person who is having a faith crisis.	8.5%	45.9%	38.8%	6.7%
I feel that I can effectively help my family members avoid having a faith crisis.	5.8%	43.7%	43.1%	7.4%

These results surprised me. Stake and ward leaders were somewhat ambivalent to the statement that the Church provides adequate materials to address faith challenges and to the statement that they feel able to effectively minister to those in a faith crisis. A full 85 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that their wards and stakes provide training to leaders on faith crises, and almost 74 percent disagreed that their ward leaders know how to effectively minister to those doubting their faith. The vast majority of leaders believe that addressing faith challenges in church is very important yet indicate they are not receiving the training to help them do so. For me, the data indicates that something is different today than it once was: current local leaders worry and have a lack of confidence in how to respond to those struggling with their faith.

In September 2018, I administered my *Faith Crisis Member Survey* to members of a social media group of Latter-day Saints who are in a faith crisis but are working to remain positively engaged with the Church. I asked participants to respond to seventy-three questions and statements about them, their faith, and their understanding of a faith crisis. I received 320 responses that met the selection criteria of being in a current faith crisis; the respondents were of a wide mix of ages, gender, and geographic locations within the United States. Here are their responses:

Rate Each Statement about Faith Crises
(*Faith Crisis Member Survey*)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The Church as a whole provides adequate information for leaders to help people who are in a faith crisis.	0.0%	.6%	25.9%	73.4%
Our stake and ward provides training to leaders about faith crises.	0.0%	.6%	38.4%	61.0%
My ward leaders know how to effectively minister to individuals in a faith crisis.	0.3%	3.8%	40.9%	55.0%

These responses are from the very members we are at risk of losing, and they have no confidence in materials from the Church, training within the stake and ward, and the ability of their leaders to understand and minister to their needs. If we are unable to understand them, I fear that these trends of disaffiliation will continue.

The Church is aware of these challenges and is responding. Faith challenges have always existed, but today's faith challenges are different and need new approaches. Elder Marlin K. Jensen said, "The [First Presidency

and Quorum of Twelve] really do know, and they really care. And they realize that maybe since Kirtland, we never have had a period of, I'll call it apostasy, like we're having right now."[15] Every general conference in recent years seems to have at least one address about strengthening faith. Some of my favorites are Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's April 2017 "Songs Sung and Unsung,"[16] President M. Russell Ballard's October 2016 "To Whom Shall I Go?"[17] and Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf's October 2013 "Come, Join with Us"[18] and October 2014 "Receiving a Testimony of Light and Truth."[19]

The Church has also published the Gospel Topics Essays on its website that provide background information on historical and doctrinal topics that may be challenging for some members, including polygamy, the various accounts of the First Vision, the Book of Mormon translation, and teachings about women and the priesthood. Curriculum has been expanded to include additional resources that teachers can use to address concerns raised by class members. The Church's efforts to be transparent include monumental efforts by the Church History Department, including the Joseph Smith Papers Project (a remarkable endeavor to provide early Church documents to members and researchers)[20] and *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days* (the most complete and accurate history that has ever been published by the Church).

Beyond its efforts to be more transparent, the Church has introduced new types of instruction, including the *Come Follow Me* curriculum for youth, doctrinal mastery in seminary, first-Sunday council meetings, and curriculum for Relief Society and Elders Quorum that rely on discussions of general conference talks. Teacher council meetings now provide a setting for teachers to discuss ways to create unity in the classroom and teach about difficult issues.

With the retirement of the Home and Visiting Teaching programs and the introduction of their replacement, ministering, Church members are encouraged to move beyond monthly (and often mechanical visits) with other members to a more ministerial process. President Jean B. Bingham, the general president of the Relief Society, described ministering as a process of loving and informed service: "We ask, 'what does she [or he] need?' Coupling that question with a sincere desire to serve, we are then led by the Spirit to do what would lift and strengthen the individual."[21] Similarly, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland says,

> We have an opportunity as an entire Church to demonstrate "pure religion . . . undefiled before God"—"to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light" and to "comfort those that stand in need of comfort," to minister

to the widows and the fatherless, the married and the single, the strong and the distraught, the downtrodden and the robust, the happy and the sad—in short, all of us, every one of us, because we all need to feel the warm hand of friendship and hear the firm declaration of faith.[22]

These recent efforts by the Church are important and significant, but much of the work of ministry needs to be in our local congregations or outside of Church among our friends and in our families. We are the ones who can help build trust and create an environment of belonging where we can all find meaning from the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives. As local Church leaders and members, we have opportunities to practice the "pure religion" Elder Holland references by reaching out in compassion and trying to understand those who question the Church and its teachings. We can build bridges in how we teach and in the space we create for those with differing views.

SECTION 3

MINISTERING

This last section asks us to examine ourselves. It would be easy to put the book down now and think that with our new insights, we know how to make a difference in how we approach those who no longer believe or have faith. But these next chapters help us go a step further. They hold a mirror up to ourselves so we can examine, in specific terms, what we can do better or differently to make a lasting, helpful impact in our ministering to those we care about.

CHAPTER 9

Key Principles of Ministering

Often, what is needed most is for us to be prayerful and to listen without giving advice or platitudes. People who are suffering don't need our explanations for their condition. Our well-meaning attempts to put the situation in perspective (our perspective) can unintentionally come across as demeaning or insensitive.

—Ann E. Tanner[1]

"Ministering" is a holy term that describes how we watch and care for each other and how we show the love of our Heavenly Parents. The Church defines it as "learning of and attending to others' needs. It is doing the Lord's work. When we minister, we are representing Jesus Christ and acting as His agents to watch over, lift, and strengthen those around us."[2] Jesus Christ is the example. "Jesus wept" when he ministered to Mary (John 11:35). Though he knew he would resurrect Lazarus, he chose to stop and, without giving a sermon, take the time to cry with her as she mourned the loss of her brother. On the cross, while undertaking the infinite Atonement, he looked beyond his own unimaginable suffering and saw the needs of his anguished mother and assigned the apostle John to care for her by simply saying, "Behold thy mother" (John 19:27). He saw the infinite worth of the woman taken in adultery when he said, "Neither do I condemn thee" (John 8:11). As recorded in the Book of Mormon, he showed universal compassion when "he did heal them everyone as they were brought forth unto him" (3 Ne. 17:9). In his ministry, Jesus mourned and forgave, protected and healed—he showed love and compassion. Coming unto Christ means seeking to minister as he does.

People experiencing a faith crisis often feel loneliness and isolation. For many of these individuals, their entire lives have been built upon a belief in the Church, and when that foundation becomes wobbly or disappears completely, all their church-based personal relationships are at risk. The resulting loneliness they feel makes connection even more important. According to Brené Brown,

> We believe that the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is psychological isolation. This is not the same as being alone. It is a feeling that one is locked out of the possibility of human connection and of being powerless to change the situation. In the extreme, psychological

isolation can lead to a sense of hopelessness and desperation. People will do almost anything to escape this combination of condemned isolation and powerlessness.[3]

Ministering means being the human connection that people in this isolation need.

Modern scripture teaches us that the power to minister does not come from being a parent or from having a calling or assignment. Nor does it come through priesthood office or authority. As Doctrine and Covenants 121 teaches us, "No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood." Power in ministering comes "only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile" (vv. 41–42). Ministering is loving people and developing authentic relationships. And it doesn't require a perfect knowledge of the gospel or of others' lives. Eric D. Huntsman in a devotional at Brigham Young University explained this well when he said,

> As aspiring Christians but still imperfect Saints, we may not always understand the struggles of others or know how to help. But we can always love them, creating safe spaces where others—and often we ourselves—can struggle with the hard sayings in life.[4]

Either we can help build trust and belonging for people or we can push them away. The way we treat others determines the level of their trust in our relationship with them and our professed belief in Christ. If they trust us, they are more likely to be who they really are—to be authentic—with us and to feel a sense of belonging. As we better understand why people leave the Church and the intense emotions they feel during the process—including feelings of anger, fear, and loss—we don't have to agree with their decision to distance themselves from the Church, but we can feel and express empathy for them and their changed belief. To them, the issues that concern them are real, and their feelings are deep.

Although we should always hope that everyone will find the meaning, belief, and connection we have in the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, if our ministering is based only on that hope, our efforts will likely be shallow and ineffective. We should instead set our expectations on building deeper and more loving, complete, and accepting relationships. When our ministering is based on compassion and acceptance, people are more likely to trust us and to open up about issues that are important to us both. In this chapter I focus on three essential principles of ministering that will help

create trust and connection: listening, avoiding alienating behaviors, and creating loving relationships.

Listening

If we want the kind of relationship that Huntsman described in his devotional, we must strive to understand others. This starts with listening. As James the brother of Jesus taught, "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19). Following this pattern, listening builds trust and helps others feel confident in our sincere interest and comfortable in sharing their important and vulnerable parts. We need to let others tell us about their struggles, concerns, and beliefs. When we feel the time is right, we can ask questions such as:

- Do you mind telling me about what led you to step away from the Church?

- How has your belief changed over the last year?

- Why have you stopped attending church?

- Tell me about what you believe.

Shortly after his resurrection, Jesus exemplified these types of open-ended questions as he ministered to two disciples who seemed to be having their own struggle of faith with the news of Jesus's death. On the road to Emmaus, he asked the unknowing disciples, "What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?" (Luke 24:17). He then let his disciples talk, and he listened. We can follow the Savior's example and do the same, even if what others say may be hard for us to hear. We don't want to hear negative things about beliefs or doctrines we hold dear, and we may see things completely differently from the person we are talking to, but we shouldn't let negative or uncomfortable feelings keep us from seeking to understand.[5]

One remarkable example of ministering through listening comes from Fred Rogers—better known as Mr. Rogers—who multiple generations of children watched and learned from in the second half of the twentieth century. Rogers carefully designed his show to communicate to children at their pace and in a way that created a calm and safe space, even as he covered complex issues, including death, divorce, race, and war. To understand these issues from a child's perspective, he spent time on and off the show listening to children. A journalist visited him 1995 to understand the success of his program. The interview became personal, and Rogers

opened up about the grief he was experiencing after losing one of his best friends. After talking, Rogers said to the journalist, "You're ministering to me, Tim. By listening you minister to me." The journalist later wrote, "Fred wanted to know the truth of your life, the nature of your insides, and had room enough in his own spirit to embrace without judgment whatever that truth might be."[6] In other words, Rogers wanted to truly understand people. Watching Mr. Rogers with my grandkids and learning more about him, I see the amazing way he connected with others and showed love—and at the heart of that connection and love was listening.

The power of listening and understanding that Rogers exemplified was studied by Ralph G. Nichols, who started his career as a high school speech teacher and debate coach. As he worked with student debaters, Nichols found that they improved their persuasive ability when their listening skills improved. Based on this observation, he completed a PhD with a dissertation on listening behavior. Listening became his life-long academic pursuit, and he became known as the "father of listening." His work led him to create the International Listening Association, and he published one of the first scholarly books on the importance of listening, *Are You Listening?*[7] Through his research Nichols learned that many lack the skill to effectively listen, and he identified ways to teach others to learn better and develop better relationships. Speaking of the importance of listening, he said, "The most basic of all human needs is to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them."[8]

When we truly listen, we gain not just an intellectual understanding of someone else's thoughts but also a deep, emotional connection to the other person. At the end of almost all my interviews with those who have had a faith crisis, I have been thanked for listening and letting them tell their stories. Their gratitude surprised me. These experiences reminded of the popular quote: "Listening is an attitude of the heart, a genuine desire to be with another which both attracts and heals."[9] Most of the people I interviewed will likely never meet me in person, but for them there was something important, helpful, and healing about being heard.

The integral connection between listening and healing was explained by Tich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk:

> Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of continuing to listen with compassion. Because you know that listening like

that, you give that person a chance to suffer less. If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For now, you don't interrupt. You don't argue. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like that can bring transformation and healing.[10]

In my interviews with mostly distant strangers, I found Nhat Hanh's observations to be true. After being given a safe environment to share their authentic thoughts and after being truly heard, these individuals, to whom I was a virtual stranger, felt better. They received a measure of compassion and healing. Imagine the healing we could provide to the people we know and love if we were to listen as he describes.

Janet Dunn experienced this kind of healing. She was serving in a Christian ministry when she suffered severe emotional fatigue that forced her to return home. "I knew I needed help," she said.

> Scared, yet desperate for answers, I made my way to the office of a Christian counselor. At first, my answers to his questions were guarded. But as I noticed his compassion and understanding, I began to feel safe. Soon words were pouring out of me as he sat listening intently. Like broad strokes of a paintbrush, my words were recreating whole scenes—memories of past incidents, areas of confusion. His perceptive questions helped me describe my feelings, many of them deeply buried. Talking with someone who cared gave me a chance to hear my own thoughts, and it was the beginning of my cure.[11]

Janet began a life-long pursuit of learning how to listen. Looking back on her experience, she says, "I learned that listening affirms people. Indeed, it is one of the highest forms of affirmation. When we listen, we invite another person to exist." Listening and allowing people to talk helps them clarify their thoughts and find ways to sort through the challenges they face with someone who supports them.

Psychologists, marriage counselors, and life coaches spend much of their careers helping other people learn to listen and communicate effectively. Here are some tips I have gleaned from some of these experts as I have studied how to be an effective listener:

- Be ready to listen: find the right space, time, etc. Put away the phone and turn off the music.

- Show care through body language and tone of voice and by smiling and making eye contact.

- Throughout the conversation, give brief verbal responses, such as "Okay" or "I see," to show you are listening.

- Avoid giving advice.

- Instead of asking "yes" or "no" questions, pose open-ended questions and statements, such as "Tell me more," "How did you feel?" and "What was it like to experience that?"

- Allow for silence. If needed, say, "Give me a minute please. I want to think about how to respond."

- Do not switch the conversation back to you—be present for them.

In interviewing and talking with people who no longer believe, I found some common themes. At the beginning of a discussion, those I have spoken to almost always have initial reservations about sharing their experiences and feelings. They often spend some time gauging my purpose and sincerity. For example, I met with a man in our stake who had stopped attending church meetings about twenty years ago. He agreed to meet with me and tell me why he stopped going. We knew each other a little, but we didn't have deep rapport. As the conversation continued, I sensed reservations in his willingness to be open. I asked him whether he had a concern that my real reason for talking with him was to get him to return. He smiled and said that he had thought that. I reassured him that I just wanted to understand why he no longer attended. Reassured, he gradually became more willing to share with me some significant and personal experiences and feelings. I was surprised at his degree of openness since we barely knew each other.

This experience has happened time and again. In my conversations with individuals who struggle with the Church, they have been open and honest, but they make it clear that they are not always so forthcoming. I asked them why they haven't talked with others about their faith or feelings. Their concerns are wide ranging, though there are some commonalities. Everyone seemed to be concerned about confidentiality. Their stories and their feelings are theirs alone, and they have the right to control who gets to hear them. They are also afraid of being misunderstood, judged, or labeled. These issues of faith and belief are intense and important for them, and they worry that others will minimize their concerns. By opening up, they risk a lot, including their social and family relationships. We saw this with Amanda in Chapter 5, whose relationship with her mother has never been the same since her faith change, and Allison and her husband in Chapter 6, who were released from callings after Allison confided with her bishop about their struggling testimony. Some have slowly lost close friendships after being open and honest about their faith challenges.

Even without the fear of repercussions, others may also be hesitant to express their thoughts and feelings out of a worry that the other would rather argue with than listen to them or because they want to protect the listener from information that might unsettle them.

These individuals probably have many more concerns than those listed here. If we want others to speak to us openly and honestly, we must do our part to relieve their concerns and fears. We can do that by being completely sincere and caring when talking to people about their thoughts on belief and the Church. Here are some statements that have the power to reassure people and allay their concerns:

- No matter what you say, I will love and respect you.
- I understand you have different beliefs, and it won't change our friendship.
- I will do my best to understand your perspective and your feelings.
- I promise to keep this conversation confidential.
- I will just listen. I won't preach, give advice, or tell you that you are wrong.
- Tell me why you are concerned about telling me about your beliefs.
- Even if you hold different beliefs than I do, I know you are a good person.
- I love you.

Each situation will be different, but these statements are examples of how to frame our conversations in ways that will be affirming and build trust in our relationships, and they should remind us that the purpose of listening is to build understanding. As we listen and build authentic relationships, more of us will feel like we belong. However, for those who have a strong belief in the Church and its teachings, listening to those who have lost that belief can sometimes be challenging. Some may have concerns that are uncomfortable to think or speak about, and we may be unsure of how to handle them. If we don't want to talk about a particular issue because we think it could shake our own faith, we can try to focus the conversation on the other person's feelings and not the details of their concern. If the conversation goes into too much detail on a controversial issue, we can acknowledge that they seem to be well studied, and though they may know more about that topic than we do, we understand the gist and want to focus the discussion on how to strengthen our relationship

with them and better understand how to support them in their beliefs. It's also helpful to keep in mind that although a person's concerns may be triggered by a few controversial issues, at the core of all of these concerns are usually a loss of trust, belonging, and meaning—which we can at least partly address with expressions of love and empathy.

Because of the intensity of their feelings, some may become angry as they open up and talk about their experiences. In most cases, validating and accepting the importance of their concerns will help them set aside their anger. At other times, they may just need to vent. For many going through a faith crisis, their anger maybe sharply directed at the Church or our deeply held beliefs making it difficult to be an effective listener. In these situations it is important to not take the anger personally, and it may be appropriate to tell them that we care about the Church and our faith and to ask them to try and respect our beliefs while we strive to understand theirs.

As we seek to build or maintain a trusting relationship that creates a sense of belonging, our friend or family member may test us to see if we are willing to let them be authentic. I have found that some may test the waters, disclosing information slowly to see how we react. They may want to see if we will cut off discussion when a controversial issue comes up, or they may become angry to see if we turn away. Their caution or anger may be a way to see if talking to us will risk their friendship, status, calling, or our respect. To assuage their fears, we need to affirm our constant love and acceptance of them at each step and test.

The more we listen, the more we will understand and empathize. We will build trust and increase their confidence in our relationship with them, removing the isolation that so often comes to those who no longer believe. And as we listen, we often must leave our comfort zone to show compassion, love, and understanding.

Listening means that we see people as they are. We recognize and respect their right and position to hold opinions and beliefs that are different than ours. In *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict,* the authors show how conflict can originate when we view and treat others as objects that we can control or manipulate, that are irrelevant or mere obstacles, or that have value insofar as they can be vehicles for our own objectives. On the other hand, when we treat others as persons with genuine and important hopes, needs, cares, and fears, their hopes, needs, cares, and fears become more relatable and important to us. It's easy to slip into viewing another as an object. When paying a cashier at a store or calling

a customer service representative on the phone, it's easy to see the persons assisting us as mere objects or tools to get us the items and services we want. When a mistake happens or when things take longer than we wish, we too often become angry or frustrated and begin to see these persons as obstacles in our way or wasters of our precious time instead of persons with families, needs, feelings, and imperfections.

In our relationships with people who believe differently, we too may lose sight of the person and think of them as a disruptive problem, a threat to the hopes we have for our family, or an embarrassment to our image of a perfect family. Or we see them as an assignment to somehow get them to believe differently. Some church leaders may view a person as a thirty-minute appointment keeping them from other things they want to do. When we view people in this way, we are thinking of them as objects. *The Anatomy of Peace* describes the damage that treating people as objects can cause: "Seeing an equal person as an inferior object is an act of violence. It hurts as much as a punch to the face. In fact, in many ways it hurts more. Bruises heal more quickly than emotional scars do."[12] Someone we perceive as a disruption or problem is a person with divine worth with agency to choose who merits acceptance and acknowledgment that their circumstances are real and important. Listening shows our respect for the other person.

Avoiding Alienating Behaviors

As we minister through listening, there are behaviors that we can adopt that are helpful and others that are potentially hurtful. Some things we do make listening ineffective; some behaviors may even damage our relationship with others. I remember hearing the story of six-year-old Sally who asked her father where she came from. Her father gave an extended explanation of the birds and the bees, after which Sally, perplexed, said, "Tommy comes from Pittsburg. Where do I come from?" This benign story of not understanding a question before answering is contrasted by the hurtful experience Allison had with her bishop, who I assume tried to listen but didn't fully invest himself in trying to understand. As a result, Allison and her husband felt alienated from their ward and the Church.

Formulating a Response Instead of Listening

Stephen R. Covey observed, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply."[13] If this is a habit

most of us have, we must break it in order to show love and develop understanding and empathy. When hearing someone talk about their faith struggles, our intention may be to change the person or how they view the Church. We must, however, set aside those intentions if we want to truly listen. This is hard in any setting, but when it comes to religious topics we hold dear, listening to understand and not persuade can be even harder. We may distract ourselves from listening by silently praying for just the right thing to say. Such prayers reflect our faith but may pull us away from listening intently with the goal of feeling empathy, showing love, and developing understanding. At other times, instead of listening, we may spend the time the other person is talking looking for openings to testify of truths we believe. In other cases, when we hear how someone feels about controversial issues, we may be hurt, uncomfortable, or fearful and draw away. But listening means to be completely present, not spending our focus on our own feelings or formulating a response to the other person's statements. As we read in Proverbs, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him" (18:13).

Preaching and Giving Unwanted Advice

Our tendency in conversations to focus on formulating a response instead of listening is often connected to a desire to give others counsel that we believe will help them. Our purpose in listening, however, should be to understand others, not to convince them to change. Speaking of those who are experiencing challenges to their faith, Latter-day Saint author Adam Miller writes,

> To help them, I don't need to show up at their door to tell them what ought to keep them up at night. I need, instead, to listen. I need to let them tell me what keeps them from sleeping. I need to let them tell me what worries and frightens them. And in response, even if I don't share that worry, I need to be ready and willing to mourn with them as they mourn.