George Merrill never thought it would happen to him. He’d seen it happen to others when he served as a stake president, mission president, and regional representative. But it took him by surprise.

When his wife died, Brother Merrill of Mesa, Arizona, found himself single again after thirty-eight years of marriage.

“If you’ve never lost a spouse, it’s hard to understand what it’s like,” he says. “We don’t like to think about it, but when we’re married, we’re only a heartbeat away from being single. In fact, nearly every one of us who is now married is going to be single sometime in our lives. If we thought about what that would be like, then we’d understand better what singles face.” It’s been three years since Brother Merrill found himself single, and he is now married again.

Brother Merrill’s experience is far from unique. Singleness is becoming more common in the Church, especially for women. About one-third of all married Church members will be either divorced or widowed before age sixty. In some geographic areas, the percentage of singles is even higher. For example, approximately 65 percent of the members of the Los Angeles California Stake are single.

“It used to be assumed that everyone in the Church who wanted to marry could,” says Marie Cornwall, assistant professor of sociology at Brigham Young University. “Despite the fact that Latter-day Saints are still more likely to marry than people in other religious groups, more and more Latter-day Saints are single.”

The demographic profile of the Church is changing, too. The number of divorced members is increasing—thus increasing the number of single parents. There aren’t as many single men as single women. And it is now demographically impossible for a significant number of active Latter-day Saint women to marry LDS men, especially in areas where the member-nonmember ratio is low; they are faced with the choice of either not marrying or marrying someone who is not a member of the Church. For every 100 active single women thirty years or older in the Church, there are only 19 active single men.

“For the most part, single people want to get married,” says Sister Cornwall. “Too often people assume that marriage is easily achieved by all people. Singles know that it is just not that simple.”

Whether single or married, most people want to be loved and accepted for who they are as human beings, but not categorized because of their marital status. Being accepted as part of the ward or
branch is important, along with having opportunities to serve other members. With the large numbers of singles in the Church, and the policy that singles over thirty no longer attend singles wards, their integration into traditional wards or branches more frequently becomes a challenge.

The first step to achieving a sense of belonging, says Jolayne Wilson, is for the single member to take the initiative. “As a new member of the San Luis Obispo Second Ward when I was living in California, I made a point of seeing the bishop the first week I moved to California. I told him I was ready to go to work and be part of the ward. It wasn’t long before I had a job as a visiting teacher supervisor, which gave me the opportunity to meet a lot of people. I really loved that ward because I was a part of it.

“The ward members made me feel welcome immediately. On my first Sunday, almost before I sat down, the Relief Society president came to speak to me. Then, while I was on my way to Sunday School, the bishop stopped me and made me feel very welcome. They treated me like a valuable ward member.”

Elizabeth Shaw Smith, a member of the Los Angeles First (singles) Ward before her recent marriage, learned the same thing. “If you’re friendly, other people are friendly to you. You can’t just brood and wait for people to make you feel good. The Church is a hands-on, person-to-person organization, and when you serve other people you feel good. If you go to church prepared to work, to sing in the choir, to hold a job, to talk to people, and not be wrapped up in yourself, people will accept you and respond to you.”

What are some ways to help single members feel welcome? It’s hard to generalize how all singles would like to be treated, since needs vary, just as they do with married people. A single parent might have different needs from a widow or a never-married person. Here are a few suggestions, though, that can help singles feel loved, accepted, and valued.

1. Treat singles as friends, equals, and adults.

Friendship knows no boundaries of age, nationality, or marital status. As people work together in the gospel, they have great opportunities to develop friendships and common interests.

Sometimes, however, unconscious attitudes may make that more difficult. For example, some single people, especially men, have found that they lose credibility in a Church setting because they’re divorced or have never been married.

“Single men are sometimes assumed to be, in a general sense, unrighteous,” says Ralph Finlayson of Salt Lake City. “Some people seem to feel that because a person is single, there is something wrong with him. That attitude can be painful to the single person. Almost all singles, including males, would prefer to be in a good marriage.”

“I know one man with five children who was released from his ward calling when he was divorced,” Brother Merrill says. “The man felt rejected at church; he felt as though nobody even wanted to sit by him.”
Single Latter-day Saints occasionally feel they are not regarded as adults. “I am nearly forty, and my well-intentioned Relief Society president introduced me to a single eighteen-year-old woman who she thought I’d have a lot in common with,” says one woman. “She didn’t realize we had little in common beside our single status.”

2. Ask singles to serve in Church callings.

“It’s important to give significant callings to singles who are qualified and worthy,” Brother Merrill says. “They need to have a chance for meaningful service.”

“In my stake in Los Angeles, we have single counselors in bishoprics, several single high councilors, and single women who are auxiliary presidents,” says Sister Smith. “Leaders here have learned from experience that singles are worthwhile, competent, and a great resource.”

3. Include singles in ward and stake activities.

Sometimes singles are overlooked and not invited to ward or quorum parties, temple nights, or other get-togethers. Or, if they are invited, they may feel uncomfortable going by themselves.

“If the ward is having elders quorum or high priest parties, singles of that age should be remembered,” Brother Merrill says. “And it’s important to invite them to attend with you and your wife. Sometimes they are reluctant to go alone, or they think the activity is just for married couples.”

Brother Merrill points out that singles’ needs are somewhat different than those of married couples. “We have to provide them with opportunities to meet other singles in a meaningful way. Conferences, firesides, and dances are fine, but singles need a chance to serve together, just as married couples do.”

4. Be sensitive to the fact that many adult members are not married.

“We’re a family-oriented church, and that’s as it should be,” Brother Merrill says. “But often we unintentionally say and do things that tend to alienate singles.”

In one ward, only married couples were asked to pray in sacrament meeting. In another, an announcement was made about volleyball practices for “adults” and for “singles.” In other wards, quorum or Relief Society teachers often slant their lessons to those who are married.

One single woman, nearly forty, dreads temple recommend interviews with her stake presidency because she’s always asked, “You’re an attractive woman, so why aren’t you married yet?” That question is followed by specific ones about her lackluster social life. It’s painful—she would love to be married, but that’s not a choice she’s had in life.

Almost inevitably, single people are asked in a good-natured way, “Why isn’t a beautiful woman (or handsome man) like you married?” The question implies that being single is not acceptable, says Sister Cornwall. “Just as couples who have been unable to have children appreciate the sensitivity of others who do not pressure them as to why, single members appreciate the sensitivity of others who do not pressure them about their singleness.”
5. Be aware of the special needs of singles.

“Singles may need more attention than the average married couple. A lot of singles come home to an empty house. They may need someone to do things with or talk to,” Brother Merrill observes.

Many singles need to have especially caring visiting teachers or home teachers. For instance, a single mother may need home teachers who can serve as positive role models for a teenage son, inviting him to basketball games or family outings. Single men who have children living with them may need help with things they are not prepared to handle alone; those separated from their children may feel heartbreaking loneliness.

Married persons often think that singles have few responsibilities and lead simple lives, says Sister Cornwall. This is usually not the case. “Because there is no partner to share in the task of daily living, the single person must do everything—laundry, yardwork, shopping, painting, laying sod, automobile repairs, waiting for the repairman to come, earning a living. Doing everything is difficult, particularly so for the single person with children.”

A ward where people are sensitive to others’ needs can be a great help to both married and single members. Success begins with caring, working together, communicating—and being slow to take offense. There are no separate gospel principles for singles and for marrieds—everyone is actively building the kingdom together. The love of God and of one another is the basis of all eternal progress.