Loving others the way Christ taught us is the key to unity in a home when a spouse chooses not to participate in the Church.

Elizabeth VanDenBerghe, “Marriage and the Less-Active Spouse,” Ensign, Sept. 1993, 16

Sandra* often reflects on the blessings and difficulties that she and her husband, Dave, have experienced in their 28-year union. Among the blessings are three fine grown children and a nurturing marriage that continues to thrive. Among the difficulties is their differing level of activity in the Church: while Sandra has chosen to participate fully in Church ordinances and programs, Dave has not.

Over time, Sandra and Dave worked out their own peaceful, loving way to handle that difficulty.

“I can’t pretend that our situation has been easy,” says Sandra. “But I know that the Lord helped me change my attitude and keep our marriage together.” She remembers earlier days “when I’d come home with the kids from an uplifting Sunday meeting and see Dave mowing the lawn. I’d tighten up and act cold in a way I’m sure he, and probably the kids, could sense. Thank goodness I kept all my arguments with Dave inside my head, because after I prayed, I always realized that those bitter feelings did not come from the Lord.”

Insights like that led Sandra to realize that the gospel exists to strengthen marriages and families, not to tear them apart: “If no success can compensate for failure in the home, I knew that God certainly didn’t want me to be resentful of my husband. Heavenly Father wanted our family’s success and happiness, not our breakup. That realization changed my perspective.”

Success and happiness sometimes elude marriages when one partner participates fully in the gospel without his or her spouse. The temptation remains strong for the active member to perceive only spiritual disunity in the match, viewing differences in the other’s meeting attendance or dedication level as insurmountable spiritual barriers. However, other active members, like Sandra, have found that by concentrating on genuinely shared spiritual values such as mutual respect, love, and understanding, combined with a common interest in strong family ties, spiritual unity in marriage is possible even when unity in the Church is not.

“It’s Her Choice”

Art and his wife, Pauline, had not attended Church meetings for nine years when Art was called to
be an assistant Scout leader. Since accepting that calling two years ago, Art has participated regularly in the Church. His decision to return didn’t include the tendency to nag or coerce his wife to do the same. “Pauline is the apple of my eye,” he explains, “the woman I’ve been married to for thirty-seven years. How can I deny her agency and ability to choose? We respect each other a great deal, and while I wish very much that we could go to the temple together, it’s her choice.”

Acknowledging the agency and independence of a spouse is a fundamental element in any healthy marriage. For some active spouses, like Art, accepting a partner’s choice is an extension of the mutual respect that exists in the marriage—mutual respect not only for the partner’s agency but also for the common values both share. However, for others, like Michelle, learning to accept a spouse’s agency—especially when that agency leads away from the Church—can be extremely difficult.

“I used to sit in sacrament meetings with all my thoughts focused on Paul’s absence,” Michelle recalls. “I envied families in which both spouses were active.” She spent years struggling with her feelings about her husband’s lack of Church participation.

Not until Michelle realized that Paul’s decision about Church activity was just that—Paul’s decision—did she quit feeling unhappy about attending meetings alone. Instead, she began focusing on the positive in her marriage and in her husband. “I now try to express gratitude to Paul on a daily basis,” she says. “Preaching, nagging, and other attempts to dominate him only created an unspoken hostility that can drive a couple apart.”

Sandra feels that the embarrassment she used to experience at returning from church to find her husband working in the yard was immature and irrational. “Dave is a grown man, responsible for himself,” she explains. “I’m responsible for me, for teaching my children, and for setting an example. Whether my husband is active or not, he’s been a great father to our children, a well-respected member of our community, and a completely supportive husband. While I served as Relief Society president, he took care of the kids, helped with projects, and accepted many sisters into our home when they needed my help. I’m grateful his choices have strengthened me and our family, and I respect him for that.”

Sandra has begun to understand that Dave’s choices have also contributed to the moral and spiritual unity of two people who hold kindness, integrity, and sacrifice in common as personal goals, despite their differing activity levels in the Church.

**Love and Understanding**

Art refrains from judging his wife, he says, “because I love her dearly and because I understand her very well.” He especially understands the hurt feelings she harbors since a family tragedy that occurred some years ago, during which Pauline felt ward members were not supportive enough. “I hurt for a long time myself,” Art says. “That makes it easy for me to empathize with what Pauline is going through.”

Understanding a spouse’s real reasons for not participating in the Church can strengthen a marriage and contribute to love, as well as to honest discourse.
For example, earlier in their marriage, Michelle often responded to Paul’s questions about the Church by “leaping to its defense, without regard for his concerns,” she says. Frequently, this resulted in angry words, raised voices, and bitter feelings. Gradually, however, she realized that Paul was often expressing genuine puzzlement and that his provocative statements came because he lacked thorough grounding in Church history and doctrine. “I used to think that Paul didn’t attend meetings because of school and, later, work pressures. But his reasons lie more in his upbringing and his perception of the Church than they do in obvious schedule conflicts. Now I try to be more patient. Rather than go on the defensive, I try to answer genuine questions through the scriptures, Church publications, or the help of other members.”

Sandra tries to be sensitive about the time she spends away from Dave on Sundays and other days. She knows how strongly he feels that parents should make more time to develop relationships with their children—another value both feel unifies their marriage. Consequently, when Sandra’s children were little, she found ways to attend church and still spend time with her husband on Sundays after meetings. It was important for her to worship with her children, she observes, “but I felt good about all of us, including Dave, being together for family activities in the afternoon.”

This spirit of cooperation can contribute to love and understanding on both sides, Michelle says. “I’m inclined to attend Sunday meetings during vacations, while Paul wants to skip them.” So? “On visits to my LDS family, we attend their ward. If we travel by ourselves, we do what we can agree upon. Maybe it’s not always my preference, but it preserves peace and harmony.”

**Strength in Marriage and Family**

Shared spiritual values can strengthen any marriage. But when two people do not have testimonies of the gospel in common, the spouse who is active in the Church may yearn to share spiritual feelings that must go unspoken. So in trying to draw closer to Paul, Michelle finds opportunities to discuss other uplifting ideas that he feels comfortable with. “We’ll watch an interesting program together and talk about it, or read and review a book together,” she says. “Planning activities we both enjoy helps us feel close and intimate.”

Discussing values and priorities as a couple, then, need not entail only Church-related subjects. Such discussions can create or maintain spiritual unity while they foster shared goals.

Weekends represent precious time together for Sandra and Dave, since they both work. In order to enjoy the spiritual sustenance of Sunday meetings and still have time to spend with Dave pursuing their common interests, Sandra gave up cleaning on Saturdays. “Maybe the floor doesn’t get mopped and my furniture’s dusty,” she observes, “but I’ve learned there are more important things in life than a floor so clean you could practically eat off of it.”

Art finds time to spend with his wife by freeing her of most of the housework: “I’m retired and she works—so I do about 90 percent of the cooking, cleaning, and canning, and also take care of the kids and grandkids.” That way, when he and Pauline are together, they can enjoy what they’ve always enjoyed most—a lot of uninterrupted time with their family. “We’ve always been a very close, affectionate family,” he says. “My activity in the Church, and that of our daughter still at home, hasn’t changed that.” For Art and Pauline, family love constitutes a shared spiritual goal that
helps them overcome other differences and difficulties.

Even though Art and his daughter go to church without Pauline, “My wife attends all my daughter’s Church activities, and we try to involve her as much as possible,” he says. They are careful not to shut Pauline out. All of the children know, Art adds, “that I think the sun rises and sets in my wife. Maybe that’s why there’s never been a division between us because of the Church—too many things unite us.”

Michelle encourages family unity by refusing to criticize Paul in front of their children. “When my daughter asks why Daddy stays home on Sunday,” she says, “I reply calmly that I wish he would come to church, too, but that it’s his decision.” Paul will participate willingly in family home evening, however, and Michelle has found that this is a source of family strength. Paul’s valuable insights during lessons contribute greatly.

Sandra has been grateful for Dave’s support. He spoke at their two sons’ missionary farewells, came to all of the children’s programs through the years, and refrained from voicing feelings against the Church. “He never acted condescending to me, and I never acted that way to him,” she observes. “I think that’s part of the reason our family has been so close, doing everything together from cutting down our own Christmas tree to picking up a missionary son abroad.”

**Hope and Prayer**

While mutual respect, love, and family unity all contribute to a strong marriage, periods of loneliness and discouragement almost inevitably arise for the member whose spouse is less active. It is the hardest thing in her life “not to share my most treasured possession with Dave,” Sandra admits. “Getting my endowments alone was not the way I wanted it to be. Watching my child’s temple marriage without Dave was not my first choice. I know that many deal with this pain, and I acknowledge that I’ve felt my share of it.”

She draws strength from the knowledge that having a happy family here on earth is a way to prepare for the potential of an eternal marriage with Dave. “I know that the Lord loves us both and wants our family to be happy. That thought has kept me going through many a sacrament meeting without my husband.”

Michelle remembers James 5:16: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man [or woman] availeth much.” Among her daily requests to the Lord are that her husband Paul’s heart will be softened; that he will remember his temple covenants; that he will feel the influence of the Holy Ghost; and that he will desire to attend Church meetings.

When Art finds himself getting impatient or discouraged, “I think of the most patient person who ever lived on this earth: the Savior. Who could have been more long-suffering than he with all of us imperfect mortals? His example lifts me, and I know it will someday help my wife return to full fellowship in the gospel.”

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