

Where Risk and Reward Meet

Interfaith Engagement and Learning

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The Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, Krister Stendahl, sought to accomplish one grand thing in the world. He hoped to help human beings learn to see others, to use Elder Dale G. Renlund's words, "through Heavenly Father's eyes."¹ While that may appear at first glance simple enough, the practice of doing so presents real challenges. Learning to see others as God does requires a curious empathy, one that fosters a desire to both know and appreciate. Stendahl publicly modeled what would become known as his "rules" for interfaith relationships in 1985 when he stood up for Latter-day Saints and their desire to build a temple in Stockholm. In a later interview, Stendahl summarized those rules this way: When seeking information about another faith, we ought to "let the other define herself; compare equal to equal; and find beauty in the other so as to develop 'holy envy.'"² Stendahl modeled for those who heard

1. Dale G. Renlund, "Through God's Eyes," *Liahona*, November 2015, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2015/11/sunday-morning-session/through-gods-eyes>.

2. Among those who promote the significance of Krister Stendahl's approach from the Christian perspective are Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (HarperOne, 2019), 64–67; Mauro Properzi, "Learning about Other Religions: False Obstacles and Rich Opportunities," *Religious Educator* 16, no. 1 (2015): 130, 144–46; Mary C. Boys, "Turn It and Turn It Again: The Vital Contribution of Krister Stendahl to Jewish-Christian Relations," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 2 (2016). Others have examined Stendahl's perspectives in light of other religious traditions. See, for example, Dow Marmur, "Teaching Is Not Instruction: A Jewish Perspective on Teaching Religion in the Light of Krister Stendahl's Three Rules of Religious Understanding," *Consensus: A Canadian Journal of Public Theology* 39, no. 1 (2018).

him speak, and for us today, the most charitable way to engage honestly and with care toward people who believe differently than us.

Often lost in this story is the context of protest and anger toward the idea of building a Latter-day Saint temple in Stockholm, Sweden. Further lost are the foundational relationships that were built before that day among Latter-day Saints and Stendahl, which contributed to his willingness to step courageously into a hotbed of public protest and defend a tradition that was not his own. It is possible to trace contributing factors for Stendahl's principles to Brigham Young University. Stendahl's invitation to visit BYU in 1978 was part of a conference of scholars organized by Truman G. Madsen.³ This occasion allowed Stendahl to create a natural bond between himself and Church members that he knew personally.⁴ It seems likely that because Stendahl knew about the Church, its history, and teachings through conversations with Latter-day Saints from this earlier conference in Provo, Utah, he was willing to leverage his position as bishop and Harvard divinity professor to defend the Church in such a public manner.

Elder David A. Bednar recently asked Latter-day Saints to foster better relations with people of other religious communities. During the 2024 World Interfaith Harmony Week, Bednar invited Saints to “engage in acts of learning and service, bridging gaps of understanding between different traditions and world views.”⁵ Today, there are instances of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and other forms of religious bigotry that are, according to Elder Bednar, fueled by “misinformation, unfounded accusations, and societal divisions.”⁶ At the core of his message, Elder Bednar

3. Stendahl published an article in the proceedings from this conference in 1978. See Krister Stendahl, “The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi,” in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), 139–54.

4. For the history of Richard L. Evans and Truman G. Madsen as the Evans Chair for Religious Understanding, see J. B. Haws, “Embers and Bonfires: The Richard L. Evans Professorship and Interfaith Work at BYU,” in *Let Us Reason Together: Essays in Honor of the Life's Work of Robert L. Millet*, ed. J. Spencer Fluhman and Brent L. Top (Religious Studies Center, Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, Deseret Book, 2016), 291–310.

5. David A. Bednar (@davidabednar), Instagram, January 31, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C2xUE5sLutb/?igsh=englMTljOTJpeWd0>. This post was highlighted and summarized on “An Apostle of Jesus Christ’s Invitation for World Interfaith Harmony Week,” Newsroom, January 31, 2024, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://news-ph.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/an-apostle-of-jesus-christ-s-invitation-for-world-interfaith-harmony-week>.

6. “Apostle of Jesus Christ’s Invitation.”

encouraged Latter-day Saints to follow President Russell M. Nelson's call to be peacemakers by focusing on the qualities of true disciples and not allowing differences of opinion, belief, or politics to divide us from being first and foremost charitable friends. To combat these forms of hate mentioned that are so prevalent in the world today, Elder Bednar suggested that we begin by seeking "opportunities to listen, learn, and extend our love, as we seek to see others in the way God sees them."⁷

Such invitations call to mind the charitable view of other traditions encouraged by Stendahl decades earlier. How can Latter-day Saints better engage in interfaith relations with neighbors, friends, colleagues, and others as part of their life of faith? We might start by seeking reliable information about other faiths from valid and authoritative sources. Reliable sources are best obtained by talking directly with people who practice the principles of their religion in their daily walk and talk. The motivation to seek out truth and reliable information about other faiths can also be drawn from one's own religious tradition, including teachings, scripture, and prophetic voices. For Latter-day Saints, there are many faithful patterns and effective models to follow among Church leaders highlighted on the Church's Newsroom and website.⁸

There are those who may wonder just how far such an effort can go before it becomes a challenge to one's own faith. It is, after all, easy to see the positive outcomes of Stendahl's invitation to learn, be fair and generous in our comparison, and allow adherents to describe their tradition and practice. As a set of practices, Stendahl's rules broaden the possibilities for those who seek to build positive relations. Occasionally, Latter-day Saints are conflicted around two distinct claims that might appear to be pulling in two directions. This is entirely normal and stems from strong ideas about the centrality and essential nature of the gospel message.

Latter-day Saints can learn from the approach taken by Elder Dallin H. Oaks regarding our private convictions and public engagement. He suggested, "In dedicated spaces, like temples, houses of worship, and our own homes, we should teach the truth and the commandments plainly and thoroughly as we understand them from the plan of salvation revealed in the restored gospel. . . . In public, what religious persons

7. Bednar, Instagram, January 31, 2024.

8. To learn more about how Latter-day Saint leaders participate in interfaith relations, see "Interfaith Relations," Newsroom Topic, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/interfaith>.

say and do involves other considerations. The free exercise of religion covers most public actions, but it is subject to qualifications necessary to accommodate the beliefs and practices of others.”⁹

We see that we can be, indeed must be, committed and convicted by our most sacred truths, and, when we engage with those outside of our tradition in public spaces, we must accommodate their particularities without abandoning all that we hold dear. Elder Oaks taught it this way: “We should all follow the gospel teachings to love our neighbor and avoid contention. Followers of Christ should be examples of civility. We should love all people, be good listeners, and show concern for their sincere beliefs. Though we may disagree, we should not be disagreeable.”¹⁰

Elder Oaks was asking for Latter-day Saints to be both exemplary in their convictions and deeply empathetic in their discipleship. We must always remember that the existence of truth in one religious community does not negate the truths that are held in other traditions. The hard work for believers is to invest the time and energy to understand the resonances of truth that can be discovered through all of God’s children.

Relief Society General President Camille N. Johnson, speaking in an interfaith setting in 2023, highlighted these two claims: (1) “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a universalist movement in the sense that we believe we have a message and mission for all people in all places.” (2) “The motivation for our humanitarian work is the two great commandments found in the New Testament: to ‘love the Lord thy God’ and to ‘love thy neighbor as thyself.’ The way we love our neighbors who are very different from us is evidence that we indeed love God.”¹¹ In her global ministry, President Johnson has sought to model and teach people throughout the world how these two commands reinforce each other.¹²

9. Dallin H. Oaks, “Loving Others and Living with Differences,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 26, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2014/10/loving-others-and-living-with-differences>.

10. Oaks, “Loving Others and Living with Differences,” 27.

11. Camille N. Johnson, “Remarks at the 2023 Notre Dame Law School Religious Liberty Summit,” Newsroom, July 13, 2023, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://news-uk.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/camille-johnson-2023-notre-dame-law-school-religious-liberty-summit>. President Johnson gave this address as part of a panel speaking on “Religious Responses to the Rise of Autocracy.”

12. There are many points of evidence for this opinion regarding President Johnson’s public ministry. For examples of her first claim, see Camille N. Johnson, “Jesus Christ Is Relief,” *Liahona*, May 2023, 81–83, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2023/04/42johnson>; Camille N. Johnson “Spiritually Whole in

Communities of faith may not so easily jump at the opportunity to understand others' faith traditions, even when their resulting understanding promises to be a salve for wounded communities. On the surface, it is hard to find reasons why these outcomes would not be desired, encouraged, or sought after. And yet there is a paradox. Doesn't our universalist message require that "every knee should bow . . . and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philip. 2:10–11)? Can one's desire to love others lessen a commitment to the great commission to proclaim Jesus? Some scholars argue that American religious affiliation and participation is on the decline, a fact they attribute in part to increasing religious diversity, including the rise of the "nones" and those who claim no religious affiliation.¹³ However, learning to appreciate religious diversity and seeking to understand how people engage with their practice and with their devotions to God can and often does foster a deeper appreciation for one's own tradition as well. There are some who believe that allowing or encouraging believers to learn about and from others may cause some in the community to lose their way.¹⁴ Where pluralism is sought, they believe, relativism is sure to be found. And, when the seeds of relativism are sown, the gardener loses the garden to the weeds.

However, pluralism is not a precursor to relativism. People can, and very often do, find deeper faith in their own tradition by learning about another religious community. Inquiry about others' religious practices does not lead to apostasy or apathy. People who do interfaith work well possess a disposition of openness. They also remain committed to the existence of truth in the world, including the truths taught by scripture.

Him," *Liahona*, May 2025, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2025/04/14johnson>. For examples of her second claim, see "Empowering Women's Freedom of Religion and Belief," address given at the European Union Parliament, Brussels, Belgium, March 4, 2024, <https://www.religiousfreedomlibrary.org/documents/empowering-womens-freedom-of-religion-and-belief>.

13. Daniel A. Cox, "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America," Survey Center on American Life, American Enterprise Institute, March 24, 2022, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>; on the diversity question, see Daniel A. Cox, "Religious Diversity May Be Making America Less Religious," *FiveThirtyEight*, August 23, 2016, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/religious-diversity-may-be-making-america-less-religious/>.

14. One such example during the 1960s emerged out of an anti-ecumenical stance within Latter-day Saint culture and the desire to lean into the ideas of being a peculiar or particular people. See Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 30–35.

Truth in my tradition and truth in my neighbor's tradition are not mutually exclusive realities. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, when asked about multicultural society and breaking down barriers as Christians, responded, "I don't think there would ever be a suggestion, certainly not from us and I do not think from any of you, that Christianity, the Judeo-Christian tradition, or the Western world generally has some corner on the market of truth. We will be open to truth wherever it is and from whatever persuasion, whatever culture, whatever religious faith it comes from. That seems to me to be a given for *contemporary* issues, *current* social issues in the world in which we live."¹⁵

President Dallin H. Oaks modeled this openness to truth from other religious traditions when he employed Catholic sources such as the Vatican II declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* in his call for greater unity among faith leaders and practitioners in defending religious freedom.¹⁶ President Oaks's effort to find, study, and then appreciatively share Catholic thought, even as he represented Latter-day Saint doctrine and thought to people from both traditions, exemplifies how to do this well. Latter-day Saints can look to Church leaders who unabashedly engage with people of faith and goodwill all over the world to bring greater peace, fellowship, and cooperation as they seek to solve pressing issues such as poverty or racism.

At times, it seems possible that the dual command for Christian love directed to God and neighbor is necessarily in tension with itself because our efforts fall short on both accounts. Sometimes, the best we can muster is a tolerant stance to those who are different in their worldview, practice, and belief. One scholar suggested that "tolerance is a limited imaginative register, at best a stopgap first step, at worst a failure to ask why some hold the upper hand and so have perks, power, and privilege to tolerate those they'd rather not."¹⁷ This hardly seems like the most ideal outcome of our learning about and from other religious traditions. Elder Patrick Kearon, in his address that focused on refugees, encouraged Latter-day Saints to "come out from our safe spaces and share with

15. Andrew Teal, ed., *Inspiring Service: Interfaith Remarks with Elder Jeffrey R. Holland at Oxford* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2019), 64, emphasis in original.

16. Dallin H. Oaks, "Pursuing Religious Liberty Worldwide," Newsroom, July 20, 2022, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/dallin-h-oaks-notre-dame-religious-liberty-summit>.

17. John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (Fordham University Press, 2020), 2.

them, from our abundance, *hope* for a brighter future, *faith* in God and in our fellowman, and *love* that sees beyond cultural and ideological differences to the glorious truth that we are all children of our Heavenly Father.”¹⁸ It is this love that sees divine work in the differences, leading to a reconciliation of seeming internal tensions. Such an approach, if applied to engaging across religious lines, would help individuals open up to conversations, to cooperative projects, and to a deeper understanding of how God inspires people to act in their own spheres out of fidelity to their religious morals and ideals.

One fact in the world today is that religious affiliation and practice are not universally held values. The realities of religion in the modern world are connected to the fact that people don’t just simply belong to a community of faith. They make conscious choices to belong and to remain within their community. There is pressure to abandon things that demand more of us than they seem to give back. It is too easy to fall into this self-centered, reward-based thinking about religion in the world. Though religions do promise blessings by following prescribed patterns and behaviors, they often ask more of people’s time and energy. And, across the world, people of faith consistently give more in terms of donated time, charitable offerings, and other forms of service.¹⁹

In a world that questions the utility of faith and that makes remaining within a tradition more difficult than it once was, opening oneself to understanding new forms of religious life can be intimidating or frightening for some. One way to help find greater meaning and reflection on one’s religious worldview is to learn from my neighbor about their faith. Though it is often quoted, Max Müller’s belief that, when it comes to religion, “he who knows one, knows none” rings more and more true today.²⁰ Learning to recognize the differences that exist between us without needing to disparage or dismantle is not a natural inclination, and

18. Patrick Kearon, “Refuge from the Storm,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 13–14, emphasis in original, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2016/05/sunday-afternoon-session/refuge-from-the-storm>.

19. Michael Lipka, “How Highly Religious Americans’ Lives Are Different from Others,” Pew Research Center, April 12, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/04/12/how-highly-religious-americans-lives-a-re-different-from-others/>. See also the earlier research discussed in Arthur C. Brooks, “Religious Faith and Charitable Giving,” Hoover Institution, October 1, 2003, <https://www.hoover.org/research/religious-faith-and-charitable-giving>.

20. F. Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion: Four Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution with Two Essays on False Analogies, and the Philosophy of Mythology* (London, 1873), 16.

it is exacerbated in the modern argument culture that pervades society today. Knowing another religion requires significant time in conversation, study, and appreciative observation of how people live their lives. Patience can be a virtue here because this kind of learning takes time and experience. Developing an appreciative approach allows us to cherish our unique experience and deeply value the significance of another's witness.

The Book of Mormon warns that we cannot fail to see God at the center of the collective human experience. In 2 Nephi 29:4–7, we are reminded that God reveals his word to *all* nations and uses *all* of his children to bring about his purposes. We are invited, as I read this passage, to remember that God's work is facilitated through many people, across broad swaths of time and geography, and that our role may be miniscule but no less important. His work is comprehensively inclusive because of his deep investment in individual lives, who are, according to Moses 1:39, the object of his eternal purpose. God wants all his children back, and that work is facilitated broadly across time. Our effort to love God also demands that we recognize God's covenant with all humanity, as indicated in God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17–18.²¹

The shared challenge for people within religious communities that maintain boundaries of difference is to remember that those boundaries matter for many reasons, and that those boundaries are also spaces to investigate what is real and what is perceived.²² We are people with identities that have been shaped by experience and discourse, and our boundary-making efforts help solidify the shape of those identities. Yet God still invites us to focus our common origins and central identities as children of God.²³ As we pursue a relationship with God, sometimes we lose track of the common human story because we are inheritors of noble traditions. Those deeply felt beliefs and narratives tell us about ourselves and our place in the world and cosmos. We need those assurances that come as we yearn to find our place in God's family.

21. This teaching is echoed in "Statement of the First Presidency Regarding God's Love for All Mankind," February 15, 1978, typescript, image 1, Church History Library, <https://catalog.churchofjesuschrist.org/assets/06d52821-9342-4f20-9cb3-358e6f8c8bfa/0/0>.

22. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, 4.

23. Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity," Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, May 15, 2022, 2022 Devotionals, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson>.

The invitation of interfaith experience is to avoid destructive attitudes by fostering genuine opportunities to see others' experience and journey in pursuit of God. What pluralism demands of each of us is the humility to walk with fellow travelers while we patiently wait upon greater understanding. Perhaps opening the door to the stranger is an invitation to learn more deeply how to love and serve.

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