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My Family, My Friends, My Faith

Marjorie Newton

It is the Sunday before Christmas in Sydney, Australia. During sacrament meeting, I survey the assembled ward members from my vantage point on the stand, where I sit to conduct the congregational singing. With something of a shock I realize how few of them I really know and how little of their lives I share. There, in their accustomed pew, are my mother and aunt, my husband, and our adult daughters. There are Ellen and Heather, Geoff and Thelma, all good friends with whom we have shared good and bad times for nearly half a century. There on the stand is our bishop, Indonesian-born Dutch, survivor of World War II internment during his childhood; and in the congregation is his wife, my childhood friend and Primary classmate Marie. These people are part of my past as well as my present.

But the others? I know their names and a little about them, but apart from sitting in meetings together, we have little interaction. There are Gina and Nick, and Peter and Rozina and their children, all from Fiji. There are George and Eleanor and their little grandson; Delice and her boys; Andy and Repekah and their grandchildren, as well as young adults Victoria, Gaylene, and David, all quietly proud of their New Zealand Maori heritage. There is Annie from the Cook Islands, and there is Tina from Samoa. There are Brother and Sister Cheon from Korea, with their six-year-old twin sons, sweet-faced and serious and so alike that my daughter, who teaches the CTR class, ran into great difficulty during a lesson that stressed how every single child of God is unique. The twins, who can’t be told apart by anyone except their parents, couldn’t think of a single difference between them, not even a mole, and were hugely intrigued when Jenny, suddenly inspired, told them about fingerprints.
But I don’t know them, or many others seated in the rosewood pews, as I knew the members of this same ward when it was a little mission branch whose people and programs shaped my childhood and youth. Now, as the Christmas service proceeds, the words of beloved and familiar scriptures take me back to Christmas Sunday in 1940 in this same Church unit.

It is a different building, of course: a little weatherboard and fibro hall, its hard wooden benches assembled to face the stand and its portable pulpit for 10 A.M. Sunday School and 7 P.M. sacrament meeting and then ranged round the walls for Tuesday night’s MIA and Saturday night’s social. There is no public address system, and we “air condition” the building by opening all the windows and double doors each side so that the breeze, if any should stir on a humid December day in Sydney, can pass through.

I see my seven-year-old self sitting on the stand on that long ago hot Christmas Sunday—not, as now, in a cushioned choir seat, but on one of a row of hard dining-room chairs. My best dress—blue flowered organdie, stiff and prickly—sticks out each side of my skinny legs. I proudly toss my beribboned hair just to feel the Shirley Temple curls bob round my neck. My hair is as straight as a straw broom, and the curls were achieved by my mother tightly winding the wet strands round long strips of rag the night before, so uncomfortable to sleep in but so gratifying next morning, as others of my generation also attest. I am on the stand because I have to give my first scripture recitation. No scripture readings for us. We were assigned to give scripture recitations, and recitations we gave, memorized and rehearsed at the kitchen table each night for weeks before.

The stand on which my childhood self is sitting doubles as stage and covers the font. There is a wide crack all around the removable section of the floor. The first time my newly converted father had to give a talk, he dropped his notes as he stood to go to the pulpit, and they slipped through the crack into the dark void below. He was so nervous that he couldn’t speak without his notes and had to sit down again. In the thoughtless way of children, we giggled. Remembering, more than half a century later, my adult emotions churn in belated sympathy, and other memories of the old font surface. I was baptized in it one freezing July day, six months after that Christmas program when I gave my first scripture recitation. I recall my sister and my friends leaning over the edge and sniggering at my goose-pimples as I edged toe by toe into the icy winter water.

They were dark days, those years of war. The missionaries were gone before my baptism, evacuated in October 1940, thirteen months after Britain (and Australia and New Zealand) declared war on Germany. Australian Latter-day Saints today can scarcely comprehend the shattering impact that the departure of the elders had on the dozen-and-a-half struggling little
mission branches scattered round the edge of our island continent, an island as large as the continental United States. Flung back on their own resources for leadership, some of the branches withered as not only the missionaries but many of the local men sailed away to active service. With the help of the men who stayed—those in essential occupations, the elderly, and the medically unfit—most of the branches, including ours, survived.

We children were evacuated to Grenfell on February 18, 1942—a wholesale uprooting, organized by the mission president. Grenfell was 240 miles west of Sydney, distant enough, President Orme hoped, to keep the children of the New South Wales District safe from the inexorable Japanese advance. Not everyone felt the evacuation was necessary; when, a few months later, Japanese midget submarines penetrated Sydney Harbour and shelled waterfront suburbs, President Orme felt vindicated. Meanwhile, he called plump, motherly Annie McCoy Smith (“Auntie Anne”) to lead the group and my real aunt and uncle to assist. Anne’s husband was overseas with the Australian army, and she and her two children were living in a boarding house. It was easier for her to leave than it would have been for most other women in the branch.

I was only eight and had a broken arm firmly encased in plaster that I picked at and crumbled when no one was watching. I don’t remember being told we were going or the packing or the parting from my parents. I do remember the train journey, all night in a crowded steam train that labored up the Blue Mountains west of Sydney, down the other side to Lithgow and on across the great western plains. Now, in my mind, I am in that jolting, noisy, grimy train again. Blackout restrictions are enforced through the night, blinds down and lights turned out when we stop at nameless stations (all signs have been removed) to disgorge or take up passengers and freight or water for the engine. Some of the older children sleep on the overhead luggage racks. Suitcases are packed between the facing bench seats and we little ones are stretched across, head-to-toe, head-to-toe. Tired and dirty, fretful and homesick, we tumble out next morning onto the anonymous platform at Grenfell when the guard tells us we have arrived. We walk in crocodile, two by two, twenty-seven children clutching battered cardboard cases, down the wide main street to two empty shops that have been rented to house us. As we settle into our new homes that February day, Japanese bombs are falling on Darwin, Australia’s northernmost city.

Auntie Anne and her helpers are everywhere at once. Boys sleep in one shop, girls in the other. Straw mattresses are stretched side by side along the ground floor of each shop. Huge tin and enamel cooking pots and pans are waiting in the kitchen of the girls’ home, with cases of pears and apples and
other provisions donated by local farmers. Soon we settle into a daily routine. Wash in two inches of tank water in a tin basin (New South Wales in 1942 is in the middle of a fierce drought), dress, and eat breakfast. Walk to school. Home for lunch, back to school. Home for homework, “tea” (supper) and games, prayers, and bed. On Sundays we have Sunday School, with sacrament blessed by my uncle, then a long afternoon walk followed by stories or a sing-along. The weeks go by. American forces arrive in the South Pacific, and the Battle of the Coral Sea turns the tide of the war. In dribs and drabs, we are collected by our parents and taken back to the city. But the war drags on.

Looking back, I marvel at the tenacity of the Relief Society women in our branch. For six years, sick with worry about the safety of husbands and sons at the battle front, they carry the burden of much of the work of the branch as well as supporting the local Red Cross. They take first-aid courses and prepare surgical dressings; they knit warm garments for servicemen and women in Europe and provide “comforts” (afternoon tea and homemade cakes; books, magazines, and games) for convalescent soldiers billeted in a makeshift hospital in what had been our municipal swimming pool. They pack “Bundles for Britons” (clothing parcels for victims of the Blitz) and dig up their front lawns to plant potatoes. When Sister Gray dies suddenly, her husband at sea with the Royal Australian Navy, they take her six children in and care for them for several years.

In my modern-day ward, the Primary children sing a bracket of carols. As they file back to their places, a little noisy and excited because it is now school holidays and almost Christmas, I remember my own schooldays and the excitement of “breaking up” for the long Christmas holidays in 1944, a landmark summer vacation between primary and secondary school. During the intervening days before Christmas, the shops are crowded despite rationing and shortages, and the days are blazing hot. Early on Christmas Eve, Dad sends me on several errands to deliver dressed “chooks” from our own hen run, potential Christmas dinners placed carefully in the basket on the handlebars of my bicycle. A haversack on my back holds home-grown lettuce and tomatoes and runner beans, crisp and fresh. It is only now, looking back, that I realize that the recipients were the branch widows, and my deliveries were part of an unorchestrated but unfailing support system of the branch. There was no welfare program. Not one family in the branch owned a refrigerator or a car or had a telephone. If there was a car parked outside the chapel when we turned the last corner after our two-mile walk to church, we knew the mission president was visiting.
My mind reverts to my eleven-year-old self and contemplates other Sundays, other meetings. Fast Day. Testimony meetings, two hours at least (no time limits in those days), unvaryingly divided among three elderly widowed brethren. Just once in a while one of the three is absent, and someone else gets a turn. I see my perspiring childish self sitting on a hard form, feel once again my bare legs sticking to the varnish while I gaze out the open side door to where the Brennans, who live next door to the chapel, are drinking icy-cold beer on their front verandah. They won’t go to the Celestial Kingdom, I think smugly. I wonder what we will have for tea when we break our fast that evening. I wonder what will happen to the chapel when “the call” comes to gather to Zion in America and we all sail away. To me and the other children, this long-expected event was always just around the corner, though we knew quite well “the call” wasn’t going to come in wartime.

One of the brothers is up to the part where ’e is a ’umble man, unhedicated, and not really fit for his ’igh and ’oly calling (of Sunday School superintendent), but that the Prophet Joseph was a ’umble, unhedicated man too. I am just getting old enough to work out for myself that the Prophet Joseph may have been uneducated when he was called but did not forever stay that way, certainly not for the number of years that I have been listening to this brother repeat these sentiments each Fast Day. Two of the Gleaners sitting behind me groan. “’im and ’is ’umble ’ide!” one fumes. “How long do we have to go on listening to him?” It wasn’t all that much longer. I must have been about twelve or thirteen when he caught pneumonia and died. We all missed him dreadfully. Testimony meetings were never the same again, but strangely, they weren’t better without him.

At last the six years of war, which had seemed interminable, are over; the “boys”—boys no longer, but hard, seasoned men—are beginning to come home from those faraway places, unimaginable to Australian wartime children, but with names as familiar as the next suburb: El Alamein and Tobruk; Crete and Italy; Malaya and Changi and Port Moresby and the Kokoda Trail. No longer do the aged, the infirm, and the women have to run the branch.

A year after VJ Day, American missionaries begin to return. Shipping is still scarce, berths hard to obtain, but gradually they come. There is great rejoicing in the Australian Mission. But these missionaries are not quite the same as their brothers and cousins and friends who were here before the war. These are veterans with a maturity not simply the result of their extra years but born of their experiences in battle. Unlike many of their predecessors, their testimonies are strong before they begin their missionary service. We who knew them think there has never been another generation of missionaries like them.
The branch begins to grow. We welcome the new members who come in a steady stream over the succeeding years. More branches are organized, and we children grow up and marry the new converts rather than each other as we had childishly planned. "The call" never does come. Instead we are counseled to remain and build up the Church in Australia and are promised that every blessing of the restored gospel will be ours if we do so. Most of us stay, and the blessings come. New commodious brick chapels, with recreation halls and classrooms, are built; priesthood quorums and stakes, seminaries and institutes, and family history libraries are organized; two Church Presidents and countless General Authorities visit; and finally, gloriously, a temple is built.

But we have lost something, too. I sit on the stand and mourn our missing feeling of community and wonder what we can do to regain it. Three wards meet in our chapel now. We can't come early to socialize because we have to wait for the ward before us to leave; because of the exigencies of the block program, there is no time for fellowshipping between meetings; because another ward is waiting, we can't reproduce the after-church hymn-singing sessions round the organ that I enjoyed so much as a child. Inflated land prices have driven most of the young families away, and street after street has been transformed into low-priced, medium-density apartment blocks. Few members of our multicultural ward stay more than the time it takes them to save enough to move on to a pleasanter area.

There must be something I can do. As I ponder the universal message of Christmas, I know that I must reach out. I must not live in the glow of what was but try to make today as meaningful as yesterday. I look lovingly and with new eyes at my ward members, the preponderance of dark eyes and black hair symbolizing a new Australia. They are different from the fair-haired, blue-eyed congregation I remember, but they are enriching our country and our culture and revitalizing our ward with their energy and their testimonies. As the familiar Christmas scriptures wrap us in love, I catch Delice's eye and she smiles at me, and I realize that these, too, are my family, my friends, my faith.

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