

Getting the Whole Family on One Tree

By [Godfrey J. Ellis](#)

Ensign – Feb 1978

Our extended family is *really* extended. It is partly composed of intact Latter-day Saint families. But it also includes reconstituted families with stepparents and half brothers and sisters. And there is a wide spectrum of religious beliefs, too.

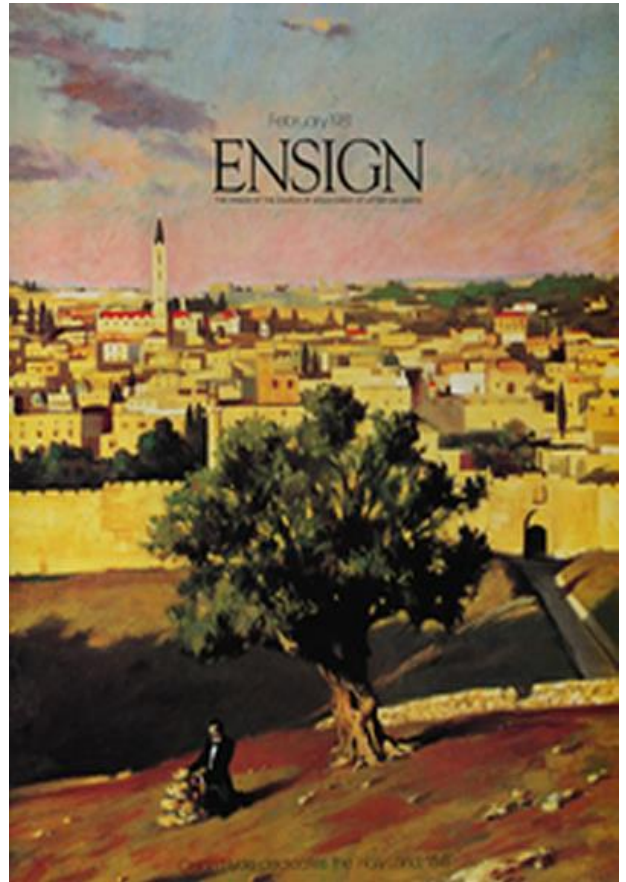
Living members of our family span over ninety-seven years, from babies in diapers to grandmothers in their nineties. The family also ranges in extremes of occupation: from salesclerks and architects to college professors and taxi-drivers. And we are separated by thousands of miles, with five family units in England, six in Canada, and four in Washington, California, and Oklahoma. A few family members aren't talking to other family members, and most of the cousins don't know each other. I have a grandmother I didn't know existed until I met her when I was twenty-seven years old.

Leontine Young describes some symptoms of modern society which contribute to a "fracturing" of the extended family:

"The necessities imposed by distance, the unceasing pulls of career and ambition, the sheer diversity and transience of modern life have brought a measure of artificiality to the effort to maintain a family in a way that was once simply normal. The bonds are there, but people must struggle not to free themselves of them but to keep them alive" (*The Fractured Family*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1973, p. 48).

We were faced with a real dilemma: we wanted to organize our family, but we weren't sure it was possible to organize one as "fractured" as ours.

It seemed to us that organization had to begin with communication, so we decided to start a family newsletter called, harmlessly enough, *The Family Tree*. My wife and I spent hours planning such noncontroversial features as "Family Member of the Month" and "Family Talent Spotlight." But then we discovered that some of our extended family members don't believe in the concept of family! Rather, they believe that one's family should be humanity, or



especially those who believe in Christ. Although it was difficult for us to understand, some family members of different religious beliefs see the family unit as a myopic concern that must be overcome and outgrown.

The problems continued. Should the newsletter contain news of birthdays and Halloween activities? Would we talk of Christmas excitement and the birth of our Savior? Some family members don't believe in birthdays, Halloween, or Christmas! Could we put in President Carter's proclamation declaring the week of November 19 as "National Family Week"? Over half the family members do not live in the United States.

We found the key to be sincere respect for the beliefs of others and keen sensitivity to each member's feelings. Family members need to feel that the organization includes them, regardless of where they live, where they fit in the family structure, or what they may believe.

One of the families, members of the Christian Science Church, had warned they would not be interested in participating in a family newsletter. So, prior to compiling the first issue of the *Family Tree*, I spent two and a half hours in a Christian Science reading room and finally found this widely acceptable and beautiful spiritual thought by Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of that religion:

"Home is the dearest spot on earth, and it should be the center, though not the boundary, of the affections" *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Boston: Allison V. Stewart, 1915, p. 58).

After we included that thought and a recognition that we all belong to the universal spiritual family of God (see Matt. 12:48-50), the Christian Science family praised the project and agreed to participate. They have become one of our most faithful contributors. They frequently send letters, inspirational thoughts, and have even helped support the newsletter financially!

The December issues necessitate a special effort to be sensitive to the beliefs of our family who are Jehovah's Witnesses. In the first December issue, we acknowledged that many Christmas traditions do have non-Christian origins, and we agreed that Christ really was not born on December 25. We pointed out that Christmas could still be a time to turn one's thoughts to the life and mission of Christ and what that means to us. Our newsletter had a picture of an oak tree on the front—we avoided the temptation to draw balls and tinsel on it! And we didn't print the pictures of Santa Claus that one of the other children drew for the newsletter. Our spiritual thought that first December was taken from a Jehovah's Witness publication.

Another time, one of the LDS families submitted a story for the "Family Fun" section telling how they had all done missionary work together for a family home evening activity. They wondered why I didn't print it. It's just that the short-range freedom of filling the newsletter with items uniquely Mormon is not worth the long-range loss of alienating some of the family we wish to include. But that's a question that will have to be faced by anyone wishing to organize a family as fragmented as ours.

Our family newsletter is a huge success. Although we sent out the first *Family Tree* over two years ago in October 1978, the family members grow more enthusiastic with each new issue. We feel that the newsletter has spanned the geographical, cultural, and religious distances and brought our scattered family closer together. Rather than becoming an easy substitute for more personal contacts, the newsletter has inspired frequent individual letters and personal visits. One high point was to see the newsletter bring two alienated family members closer together. Another high point was to see two other extended families begin their own newsletters patterned after the *Family Tree*.

One day we shall organize our family in a more complete sense. But we have a start. And we've discovered that sensitivity and respect bring their own rewards in communication and love between family members.