

Overcoming the bigotry inside myself



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Two teenagers, a 16-year-old female and an 18-year-old male, vandalized a local church, causing \$1 million in damage. They broke in and ran amok, destroying things with a baseball bat, spray-painting epithets and sacrilegious symbols on the walls, and, finally, lighting the building on fire.

The members of this church, which has seen more than its share of persecution, were shaken and heartbroken.

For 16 months the congregation relied on the hospitality of another church that rearranged its schedule to accommodate their friends. For nearly a year and a half, both churches shared one building for worship and myriad meetings during the week.

When the vandalized church was ready to reopen, they threw a big

party to celebrate, including the whole neighborhood on the guest list. My husband Chris and I got a nice flier on our porch inviting us, as did other neighbors who, like us, are not members.

I didn't give a thought to attending, but I was glad for them. If I was invited to a party for the Jewish synagogue, Muslim mosque, or Hindu temple closest to my house, and if one of those congregations had been vandalized, had been victimized by people motivated by hate, I would never pass up the opportunity to celebrate with them as they returned to worship in their own renovated, resanctified building.

Yet I have to admit that since the wronged congregation was of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints I was less interested in attending their celebration.

For most of my life, especially that crucial early part, I couldn't have imagined Mormons as people who had been persecuted. Quite the opposite; they were persecuting me. Ask anyone who grew up non-Mormon here in the '60s (for example) and you'll hear the same.

We all had a few friends who were Mormon, but the scars inflicted by Mormons as a whole run deep. So I'm predisposed to

have a bad attitude about Latter-day Saints. Like any form of bigotry, I try to resist this, to rise above it.

I've made my peace with much of what happened back then. I'm grateful for the painful interactions that caused me to strive to befriend people who are different. I am happy to have become in some small sense someone who speaks out on behalf of other people. However it happened, Mormons gave me that.

Nearly 30 years after I left public school, Salt Lake City is a different place. The world has arrived. Even my old suburban neighborhoods have evolved past the time when a brown-haired non-Mormon white girl constituted a level of diversity, if not outright novelty.

Today, there are LDS people whom I love like family and my unpleasant experiences have dwindled until they mostly involve the most ridiculous members of the Utah State Legislature, the type who spend their time worrying about issues like "discrimination toward the white, family-oriented Christian male."

Late last month, the phone rang and I got a special invitation from my friend Carolyn to attend the party at the ward house. For a lot of reasons, it would have

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been easy to skip it. But sometimes when a bell goes off like that, it's because someone needs to learn a lesson. This lesson: You can encounter a group that's different from you in some way, yet you can find the faces of friends and friendly faces there. That day, that lesson was for me.

Congratulations to the members of the LeGrand Ward and thanks for the invitation. I wish you many years of safe worship.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.