

# COME *as* YOU ARE



Creating Space for the  
Rising Generation to  
Come unto Jesus Christ

SAMUEL NORTON

Foreword by Jen Norton

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# Creating Space for the Diversity of Circumstances

*I feel like I can't be my whole self at church. I struggle to feel proud of who I am and where I've come from. Having to conform is really tough.*

*Malaika, 17*

A FRIEND, AGED 16, RECENTLY SAID:

We as a generation look for less judgement. We come to church to learn about Christ and to be accepted by our church community, no matter where we are on our journey. We don't come to tick every expectation box; we just want to be encouraged to be better, which will eventually help us to meet Church standards rather than to feel like we have to conform to a standard in order to be accepted. *There are many different ways to be good.*<sup>09</sup>

As leaders, teachers, and parents, we can help our young people to feel proud of who they are, where they have come from, and where they are on their *life-long* journey to Jesus Christ. Upfront arbitrary norms (defined perhaps as expectations that have no grounding in eternal doctrine or universal truth, and which aren't practised across all cultures and times) often become hurdles and hindrances—even if their parents or grandparents saw them as helps. Instead of conformity, we can meet our young people where they are, and help them to feel loved, accepted, and supported. Their journey to Him starts with us inviting them to come as they are.

When Jen and I were called to serve as FSY Session Directors for London, there hadn't been an FSY session for three years; bringing the youth and young adults together in this way had become a casualty of the global pandemic. Those years were tough for so many.

As we considered our role, it felt important to create a bold and radically inclusive space for the rising generation to unite in their shared desire to come unto Christ. We felt a desire to plan content that would help connect them to Him as the source of all healing, recast a more inclusive lens over His core doctrines, and help them feel that the restored Church of Jesus Christ was their safe space.

The decision had already been made to invite all striving young adults to serve as counsellors, and not just returned missionaries. The twelve respective London stakes were focused on helping as many as possible to apply.

We surrounded the youth and young adults with a rich diversity of leadership, counsellors, and teachers—all of whom had incredible personal stories of faith and deep, personal connections to London. Perhaps most significantly, we decided to revise the session's local interpretation of the (at the time) culturally prioritised norms around dress and grooming standards (no long hair or piercings for boys, a strict single set of earrings for girls, no dyed hair, and a strictly upheld dress code). It had always been inappropriate to enforce such a narrowly defined set of expectations through ultimatum and threat of exclusion, and it certainly didn't fit with the inclusive space we sought to create.

Moreover, prior to signing their children's consent forms, many families and leaders contacted our team and shared their feelings that, for them, some of the expectations previously prioritised

at church, and at FSY in particular, had been unhelpful. Post the global pandemic, these families wanted to more fully embrace a home-centred and Church-supported space for their children and were worried that if adjustments weren't made, exclusionary attitudes and behaviours would persist. Many sought assurances that we would turn the page and broaden the space to help their children come unto Jesus Christ.

In searching for our strategy, we remembered these words from Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Where Elder Ballard had used the analogy of a boat, Elder Holland used the analogy of a choir. He said:

I plead with each one of us to stay permanently and faithfully in the choir, where we will be able to savor forever that most precious anthem of all—"the song of redeeming love." Fortunately, the seats for this particular number are limitless. There is room for those who speak different languages, celebrate diverse cultures, and live in a host of locations. There is room for the single, for the married, for large families, and for the childless. There is room for those who once had questions regarding their faith and room for those who still do. There is room for those with differing sexual attractions. In short, there is a place for everyone who loves God and honors His commandments.<sup>10</sup>

We noticed that he didn't say "keeps perfectly His commandments." Rather he said "honors." He continued, with emphasis added:

"*Come as you are,*' a loving Father says to each of us, but He adds, 'Don't plan to stay as you are.' We smile and remember that God is determined to make of us more than we thought we could be."<sup>11</sup>

Jen and I desired to flatten the path leading to the Saviour. Together with our team, we focused on a more inclusive invitation. Our ambition was that, at FSY, if the youth and young adults could feel accepted and loved unconditionally, they would more easily find the personal healing that comes only from the Saviour. We aimed to faithfully and carefully dismantle any distracting, local cultural norms and scrape off some of the barnacles. We made adjustments and replaced them with more spacious alternatives. We still had important rules to keep everybody safe and to establish boundaries. But those rules aligned to the sorts of rules you would find on school trips and summer camps.

We wanted the youth and young adults to feel trusted and to exercise their agency in the commitments they would be invited to make. FSY is just a programme after all, and we were only its latest London custodians. As Elder Uchtdorf would later teach, "Jesus Christ *is* the strength of youth."<sup>12</sup>

Our strategy for FSY was formed approximately one year before the updated release of the *For the Strength of Youth – A Guide to Making Choices* pamphlet, which meant that our intentional changes weren't without feelings of inertia and trepidation. As word spread, where many felt excited, others felt nervous and even uncomfortable. Some felt the generous approach was inappropriate. Some parents wanted clarification that these changes were aligned to Salt Lake City and were concerned that FSY London would suffer from a lack of governance and would spin out of control. We privately questioned whether *control* was an appropriate word when seeking to inspire and invite young people to turn towards the Saviour and put their trust in Him.

We knew what we had felt, and we trusted our team of exceptional young adults who received their own witnesses and spiritual experiences of what we were unitedly trying to achieve. At FSY, we were determined to create the space that would detach the rising generation from outdated prejudices and reattach them to the Saviour, His doctrines, and deep feelings of validation, acceptance and belonging.

As a team, we launched our social media campaign, spearheaded by the hashtag of Elder Holland's invitation to #comeasyouare.

After a year of planning, the morning of FSY arrived. As the buses pulled in, Jen and I felt excited. As the youth filed out in their hundreds, a powerful spirit of inclusion filled our hearts. Everybody came ready to fill the space with their culture, their personalities, and their faith in Jesus Christ—no matter how fledgling or how mature. They had heard the spirit and tone of the invitation. They were their authentic selves. No hurdles had been placed in their way. Some of them had blue hair, some pink. There were earrings for boys and double-earrings for girls. One of the boys had a beautifully dyed leopard-print afro. Some of them had nose piercings. Many of the boys had long hair and some wore beards. That day there were no off-ramps and no ultimatums.

As the week progressed, many of these incredible young people told us how they felt seen and heard. They said that because of this, they felt reassured that this was their space and their time to come unto Christ.

Thankfully, many that identify as LGBTQ+ came to FSY too. During the week some of them shared their faith in the Saviour. One of them said, “I have always felt that I would one day have to leave this Church that I love so much. This week I feel I want to stay and help create this kind of space for as many people as possible.”

*Come as You Are* could be a tagline for membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. If not on the doors of our chapels, then, at the very least, in the hearts and minds of our members. *Come as You Are* is shorthand for *Come unto Christ as You Are*.

We read in the scriptures: remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God.<sup>13</sup> He is no respecter of persons,<sup>14</sup> and has invited “all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denies none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; and he remembers the heathen; and all are alike unto God, both Jew and Gentile.”<sup>15</sup>

Paul, in his epistle to the Philippians, wrote “in whatsoever state I am,” (the Pauline equivalent of *Come as You Are*), “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”<sup>16</sup>

Jesus Christ said: “Come unto me, *all ye that labour and are heavy laden*, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.”<sup>17</sup>

*Come as You Are* is a validation of our starting point, a recognition of our circumstances, and a reassurance that He (and not others) will give us rest as we turn, face, and then come unto Him. This rest could refer to the ultimate and eternal rest with Him and our heavenly parents, but it is also likely to refer to periods of rest in our lives when the difficult times come. It could be peace of mind, an inner feeling of calm, a healing of the body, heart, and mind, or a feeling of acceptance and belonging. It can be all those things and more. What a promise!

The rest Christ speaks of doesn't come from family or friends. It doesn't come from the Church, at least not directly. The full message of the invitation is for people to come as they are and, over time, feel restored by Him, in a way that is perfectly customised, perfectly stretching, and perfectly healing. It will take sacrifice, and yes, it requires that we act in faith. But trusting our young people, as opposed to telling them; helping them to find their own timetable, and not that of others, is hopefully an update we can all agree on.

Yet, despite this agreeable opener, too often we appear to create and prioritise a culture of conformity and standardisation, which is often exclusionary for far too many. Teaching the rising generation that there are arbitrary conditions and norms to live up to before they can feel safe, start, progress, or restart their personal faith in God, or before they can feel the influence of the Holy Ghost is at best unhelpful and at worst harmful.

Jesus prioritised lost coins,<sup>18</sup> lost sheep,<sup>19</sup> lost treasure,<sup>20</sup> and returning prodigals.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, He spent time with the marginalised, the blind,<sup>22</sup> the deaf and mute,<sup>23</sup> the lame,<sup>24</sup> the lepers,<sup>25</sup> the believing, and the doubting,<sup>26</sup> He never asked people to meet arbitrary standards before He extended His invitations, and it was ultimately their faith in Him that preceded His miracles. He also chastised and corrected any unjust in-groups creating cultures that excluded people. He was the ultimate space-creator as He invited them to follow Him.

The Gospel authors position struggling souls as the protagonists of Christ's stories, miracles, teachings, and general ministry. The Saviour heals people as they come as they are, and as they

exercise their faith in Him. Our youth and young people do not have to earn His fondness through compliance to norms. God sent His Son<sup>27</sup> regardless of who accepts His invitation to repent and be restored.

When Jesus visits the Nephites, He summarises His doctrine by saying simply “ye must repent, and be baptised in my name, and become as a little child, or ye can in nowise inherit the kingdom of God.”<sup>28</sup> Despite the simplicity and universality of His teachings, a lot more fine print has been added in the latter-days, including mindsets, expectations, attitudes, and behaviours—many of which have come to define our church culture. Although there are benefits to such a strong set of identifying markers, if not careful, they can become over emphasised and exclusionary to people trying their best.

Because of these mindsets, it is my observation that our faith tradition can at times inadvertently create and prioritise certain “in-groups.” Before we realise it, our culture celebrates the in-groups and leaves the out-groups behind. Such in-groups might include returned missionaries, active members, temple recommend holders, priesthood holders, traditional two-parent families, married couples, full-tithe payers, multi-generational families, and even notoriety from a famous family name, amongst others. Perhaps in-groups form around the wealthy ones, the popular ones, the academic ones, or the musical ones.

In-groups can form when we thoughtlessly exclude sisters from council meetings, or when we don’t give them a voice in decision-making. In-groups might form from calling the same people with the same backgrounds, skillsets, and experiences into leadership callings.

Our young people pick up on these subtle exclusionary behaviours. In many cases, their observations later become blocks to them learning to love their faith and feeling proud of it, especially in times when it feels fragile.

Moreover, when we teach a sermon to our young people on a narrowly defined ideal (subtly promoting a particular in-group) we also teach the parallel sermon that those who cannot or have not yet achieved the same are somehow less than. This is why the living prophet teaches the doctrine of Christ and the principles of the gospel and not personal applications or interpretations. When we try to help by teaching our personal, narrow practicalities, we put many into an out-group. We create in-groups. These segregations create divisions and inadvertently exclude members instead of including them.

In the Book of Mormon, Alma led a mission to reclaim the apostate Zoramites, who were perverting the ways of the Lord. Although they denied the Christ, we can draw parallels between how they excluded others and how we need to keep our faith communities broad, inclusive, and welcoming, so that people can learn as they grow. The apostate Zoramites’ dominant faith narrative was that they were the Lord’s chosen people. Does that sound familiar?

[T]hey did gather themselves together on one day of the week, which day they did call the day of the Lord . . . and [cried] . . . we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children . . . thou hast elected us that we shall be saved . . . we thank thee that thou hast elected us . . . [E]very man did go forth and offer up these same prayers. . . . Now after the people had all offered up thanks after this manner, they returned to their homes, never speaking of their God again until they had assembled themselves together again to the holy stand.<sup>29</sup>

It’s no wonder that Alma and his missionary team were “astonished.”<sup>30</sup> Mormon, in his latter-day foresight, decided to include the account of the Rameumpton, rather than exclude it. Weighing the opportunity cost of his edit, the level of detail he included is significant. Even retaining its original curious name seems designed to catch our attention. It’s as though he is saying to us in our day: “Look at this, right here. This matters!” Why? Perhaps because he wanted to warn against creating dominant mobs, or in-groups and out-groups within our religious communities. Among the apostate Zoramites, there was no *Come as You Are*; only one set of attitudes and behaviours was permitted to prevail.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus taught a parable about a Sower who went forth to sow. As the writer recorded it, the seeds were sown without prejudice. Some fell by the wayside, some were devoured by the birds, some fell in stony places, and some in shallow soil where there wasn't enough depth for their roots to flourish. When the sun came out, these were scorched up and withered away. Others fell amongst thorns, and when the thorns sprung up, they were choked. Others, however, fell into good ground and brought forth fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Unusually, the author wrote that the Saviour gave a detailed explanation of the parable.

In this description, the seed was the 'word of the kingdom.' The different types of ground were different reactions to receiving the gospel message. Some received it and were led away. Some received it and fell away when persecution and tribulation came. Others were choked by what are described as the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.<sup>31</sup>

It's easy to see how such a clear parable might lead us to create an in-group of 'fertile soil' members, and an out-group of those who don't yet want to (or can't or feel they can't) bring forth fruit. A certain tribalism can quickly take hold. Surely this is a justifiable mindset, we tell ourselves, as it comes from the mouth of the Saviour Himself! Creating a strong in-group identity of what it means to be faithful keeps our young people on track and keeps 'the world' out.

Heeding such warnings against temptation, pride, hard-heartedness, and apostasy is no doubt important. After all, where would we be without clear boundaries on what is right and what is wrong? Fences that keep the wrong influences out also double as boundaries and guardrails for those within the covenant. But when those fences keep young people from drawing near, or prevent them from feeling inspired and engaged, that is when the fences become a problem.

Could there be another layer to the parable for those "who hath ears to hear?"<sup>32</sup>

In Matthew 13, whilst God is undoubtedly the Sower, could an additional interpretation be that the seeds represent us—His children? In the language of the parable, in His perfect love and wisdom, God allows us to be planted in all manner of places, some in the fertile soil, others by the wayside, some of us in thorny places, and others in shallow soil. In the moments of our lives where we are able to bring forth fruit unto Him, for some it is a hundredfold, for others it is sixty-fold, and for others it is thirty-fold.

In order to settle the injustice of such a seemingly random sowing, and in order to overcome all of the inherent weakness and mortal conditions of the Fall of Adam and Eve, we are provided a Saviour to heal us and to bring us safely home. In the parable of the sower, could Jesus also be reminding us that there is endless differentiation in what our mortal experiences entail, by design? Could He be reassuring us that, despite our different places of planting, He labours to help us? But if this is the case, where is the resolution? How does He resolve the apparent randomness of our personal predicaments? To find that, we might borrow some light from the next parable.

Immediately after the parable of the sower, Jesus teaches the parable of the wheat and the tares.<sup>33</sup> This time, the kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field. As he slept, the enemy sowed tares amongst the wheat. Despite the disaster, the decision was made not to separate them until the harvest. At that time, the tares would be burned, and the wheat gathered in. Until then, the wheat would have to live with the tares.

When we sit atop our Rameumptons, trying to influence our young people, it can be easy to assume that the wheat represents the righteous and the tares represent the unrighteous – those who refuse to follow Christ or at least don't do it the way we all think they 'should.' The scriptures record that the disciples asked Jesus to explain this parable too. He appears to confirm the above view, suggesting the good seed are the 'children of the kingdom,' and the tares are the 'children of the wicked one.' Simple enough. Fortify the in-group and exclude the out-group until they conform. Jesus said so.

However, if this is all we take from these parables, we are likely to misrepresent the true nature of our concerned and inclusive Heavenly Father and His Son whom He sent.

The realisation that there is divine design to the diversity of our circumstances helps to replace feelings of comparison with compassion and feelings of loss with love. Equally important to

remembering that God plants His children in different places is to remember that He never plants any of them in places where they will fail or become overwhelmed by their personal tares.

All who come as they are unto Him, with their wheat and their tares, their wounds accrued throughout their mortal experiences, can and will be a success in the end. He alone will cast off their weakness—or their tares (personified as ‘children of the wicked one’). Until He does so, the rest of us can be loving and supportive, doing our best to nurture the wheat.

All of us find ourselves in stony, arid, and thorny places by the wayside, because of our weakness. Jesus’ invitations are personalised to our starting point and to our experiences. Why else would Jesus say to the certain young man who had kept all the commandments from his youth to “sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me;”<sup>34</sup> whereas he said to the woman caught in the act of adultery to “go, and sin no more?”<sup>35</sup> The Saviour knows the circumstances of our planting, he knows our tares and personalises His healing. He invites us to come as we are and to act in faith. His “grace is sufficient.”<sup>36</sup> There is so much more empathy and reassurance within these two parables when we apply an intentionally inclusive lens. It’s that same lens we can passionately apply to our young people.

*Come as You Are* doesn’t only extend to the new friends that the missionaries find and teach. That level of acceptance uses well-trained muscles. That level of tolerance can potentially be a righteous pride, another commendation, another merit badge, atop the Rameumpton.

No, the Christ-like empathy we are asked to learn extends to everybody on their terms and God’s terms, not on our terms. Our empathy can extend to the young woman that is learning to find and express herself in her dress and appearance and the young man whose attitude and behaviour is masking his vulnerability and fear. Our empathy can extend to those young people who aren’t yet ready to meet every standard historically emphasised by the faith tradition.

A loving and non-judgemental *Come as You Are* extended to the rising generation includes those exercising their agency and pushing or even rejecting boundaries. It extends to those who leave the Church and come back. It extends to those who leave the Church and don’t come back. It extends to youth and young adults when they struggle to draw the same conclusions as their parents about their faith. It extends to young adults who go to university and find higher education incompatible with religious conviction. An attitude of *Come as You Are* keeps the door open and the lights on for everybody to one day turn towards the Lord and come unto Him.

It is so damaging to people’s faith and spiritual security when these starting points and places of planting are ignored or overlooked. Consider how damaging it can be when we teach the realities of Christ’s love and available mercy, but then, inadvertently, participate in and perpetuate a Rameumpton-like culture towards those who struggle. People struggle for all sorts of reasons. The Saviour doesn’t ignore those reasons. Neither should we.

Inviting our young people to *Come as You Are* also includes those that have made mistakes and fallen from the covenant path. Although we may readily accept that all sins can be forgiven, we also have to accept that not all opportunities can be restored. But a merciful God can see beyond that too. In 4 Nephi, in describing the restoration of the Nephite infrastructure following the global destruction associated with the death of Christ, Mormon reminded us how a loving God moves us past our missed opportunities by giving us new ones. He says:

And the Lord did prosper them exceedingly in the land; yea, insomuch that they did build cities again where there had been cities burned. Yea, even that great city Zarahemla did they cause to be built again. But there were many cities which had been sunk, and waters came up in the stead thereof; therefore these cities could not be renewed.<sup>37</sup>

When the choices of our young people are met with their consequences, often their former opportunities are no longer available. The unavailability of those opportunities can create anxiety. Consider the mission not served, the young adult divorcee, or those working through their repentance with their bishop.

When we allow our young people to truly come as they are, striving to do their best, exercising faith in Christ unto repentance, we avoid chaining them to their past mistakes. The Lord helps restore them by moving them on. To do so, He provides them with new opportunities. Helping the rising generation to come as they are means helping them progress onwards and not limiting them in what they can do at church. “In the kingdom of God, there are no second-class citizens.”<sup>38</sup>

As teachers, leaders, and parents, we need to remember that the scriptures don't say ‘Remember the worth of repentant souls is great in the sight of God,’ or ‘believing souls,’ or ‘high performing souls,’ or ‘obedient souls,’ or ‘tithe-paying souls are great in the sight of God.’ Neither does it say ‘modestly dressed souls,’ or even ‘clean-shaven souls,’ or ‘souls who don't identify as LGBTQ+ are great in the sight of God.’ The revelation simply says ‘souls.’<sup>39</sup>

Of course, we all need to repent. We need to make and keep covenant obligations. But that is between each of us and the Lord, and it is on the Lord's timetable, with the support of the bishop and the stake president if we want to participate in priesthood ordinances. Ultimately, there is a Judge. But, as our Creator, He alone owns the celestial definitions of desire, faith, humility, sincerity, sorrow, and repentance. Only He can look into our hearts and understand what resides there.

Before we came to earth, the value of their souls was worth the War in Heaven, worth the Fall of Adam and Eve, worth the infinite Atonement and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and worth the Restoration of the gospel in the latter days. And all before they made a single choice or grew a single tare!

As we stood at the open doors of the coaches at FSY that first day, I felt emotional. I felt we were witnessing something truly special and felt the Lord's comforting approval that we were on His errand. That week, our team sought to create an environment where everybody (counsellors and youth: the rising generation) could grow in spiritual security, with a deep sense of inclusion and belonging, no matter their story, no matter their starting point, no matter their circumstances, no matter their missed opportunities, and no matter the level of commitments they were ready and prepared to make. Our role was to help flatten their on-ramp as they approached Him in faith, to create the space where they could feel that they belonged.

At FSY, we trusted the youth and young adults to choose Him and to find their own revelation on how to move forward, leaning into new stretching opportunities to find personal growth, and by making plans to receive their next ordinance. We trusted Him to nurture their faith and answer their prayers. We trusted them to learn how best to come unto Him through personal faith and personal repentance. We didn't love and trust them despite their circumstances. We loved them because of their circumstances. Their beautiful places of planting reminded us that the Saviour works with all of us, no matter our starting point and no matter our personal challenges. At the heart of it all was the invitation to start from where they were, no matter the past. By welcoming them and not judging or condemning them, through trust and not ultimatum, with them all safely gathered in, we set about connecting them to Him.

## Chapter Summary

Many of our young people feel burdened by unreasonable expectations that don't validate their starting point or their personal circumstances.

We can help the rising generation understand that there are no arbitrary hurdles to come unto Christ and to exercise faith in Him.

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- [09](#) Private Correspondence
- [10](#) Jeffrey R. Holland. *Songs Sung and Unsung*. General Conference. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. April 2017. Gospel Library.
- [11](#) Ibid
- [12](#) Dieter F. Uchtdorf. *Jesus Christ Is the Strength of Youth*. General Conference. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. October 2022. Gospel Library.
- [13](#) Doctrine and Covenants 18:10
- [14](#) Doctrine and Covenants 38:16
- [15](#) 2 Nephi 26:33
- [16](#) Philippians 4:11,13
- [17](#) Matthew 11:28-29 emphasis added.
- [18](#) Luke 15:8-10
- [19](#) Matthew 18:12-14
- [20](#) Matthew 13:44
- [21](#) Luke 15:11-32
- [22](#) Mark 8:22-25
- [23](#) Mark 7:31-37
- [24](#) John 5:2-9
- [25](#) Matthew 8:1-4
- [26](#) John 20:24-29
- [27](#) John 3:16
- [28](#) 3 Nephi 11:38
- [29](#) Alma 31:12-23
- [30](#) Alma 31:12
- [31](#) Matthew 13:3-23
- [32](#) Matthew 13:9
- [33](#) Matthew 13:24-30
- [34](#) Mark 10:20-21
- [35](#) John 8:11
- [36](#) Ether 12:27
- [37](#) 4 Nephi 1:7-9
- [38](#) David S Baxter. *Faith, Fortitude, Fulfillment: A Message to Single Parents*. General Conference, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, April 2012. Gospel Library.
- [39](#) Doctrine and Covenants 18:10

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