

South of Olympic

If you're looking for a house in that area and price range," said the real estate salesperson — and she lowered her voice to a horrified whisper — "You'll have to go *south!*" I rested the telephone receiver against my neck and sighed.

"Yes, I know. I'm looking for something south. Don't you have any listings within the boundaries I've given you?"

"Well, honey, not at this time. We try not to work in that area."

It was my third day on the telephone. California real estate in 1979 was quite expensive and we were trying to find a house we could afford within the Wilshire Ward. We knew we had to stay in Los Angeles — both of us felt that nobody in his right mind would spend several hours a day commuting from the suburbs. And Wilshire Ward had pretty well claimed us — my husband had been called to be bishop.

Now, Wilshire Ward has a glowing, legendary past. Meetings are held in the fantastical Art Deco cathedral of the Los Angeles Stake Center. Oldtimers lovingly recount tales of the days when the Church in Southern California was run like a country club, when what is now the cultural hall was a ballroom with crystal chandeliers and sunken orchestra pit, when people arrived in chauffeured limousines for meetings. If a young mother should bemoan the lack of baby-changing and nursing facilities, she is informed that in 1927 children were not brought to church. (In Wilshire Ward they stayed home with the nanny.) Times have changed, and the old neighborhood has gone considerably downhill, but even a cottage in a "good" neighborhood within the ward boundaries sells for several hundred thousand dollars.

Yes, we would have to go south.

To go south is an interesting experience. One can ride south on the Western Avenue bus, a route which covers the stretch of Western from Hollywood Boulevard to the Imperial Highway, and observe that all the white people get off at Wilshire Boulevard. A few blocks further south, all the Orientals get off at Olympic. As the bus approaches Washington, the Latinos alight, leaving only black people (and us) to go on south of Adams.

Well, I knew there must be houses for sale in the area where we were looking. Those agencies just don't advertise in the *Los Angeles Times*. I began to

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drive through likely neighborhoods, seeking "for sale" signs. I began to ask around. People thought I was nuts.

The problem of how to obtain an affordable home was not the only one we faced. My husband was concerned about his stewardship over the several hundred thousand people within the boundaries of our ward. As it was at the time, the vast southern reaches of our ward, which extend south to Slauson Avenue, had few church members. How were the blacks living in those areas going to learn the gospel from their friends and neighbors if no neighbors had the gospel?

"Maybe I should be like Brigham Young and call people to colonize those unsettled areas," mused the bishop. We came to the conclusion that he was on the right track, that there is no time like the present to colonize, and that since there were no other volunteers waiting in line, we should be the ones to begin.

We had been dismayed as family after family left our ward to settle in "white flight" areas. Couples would stay a few months (or maybe even a few years) and then be gone. I had begun to feel that as soon as I had made a friend, she would be moving — to Fontana, or the San Fernando Valley, or Orange County or (worst of all) to Utah. It would certainly have been easier to jump off with the rest of them, but we knew the Lord needed us here.

My family regarded the idea with amusement, Roy's with horror. We began with a great deal of trepidation and visions of Great Danes, six-foot chain-link fences, and double cylinder deadbolts. But one Sunday evening we received a call from a formerly unhelpful real estate agent. When we heard the asking price, we jumped into our car and found the house on a lovely quiet street. We knew at that instant we had come home. After a glimpse of the interior the next day, we made an offer on the spot. Nowhere else in the city could we find oak floors, Craftsman paneling, coffered ceilings, leaded and bevelled glass, and a lovely little dormer window for anywhere near that price. (Others were not so impressed. We still hear, "This will be a cute place when you get it fixed up." And the Craftsman paneling hid plumbing and electrical problems and did not hint at the spooky noises in the attic.)

We put off buying the Great Dane until after we moved in — no room in our rented apartment. After we moved in on 12 December 1979 we felt no immediate need for a large dog. We still don't. You see, we have our neighbors.

Our neighbors were on the doorstep the day we moved in, welcoming us to our new home, helping carry sofas, and bringing advice and gossip. They played with our baby, they invited us to their churches. They reassured us that we had chosen a nice place to live. They wanted us to feel welcome and at ease. Yes, they were black. From that time on, all have been a source of friendship, strength, and Christmas goodies, keeping a watchful eye on us and our property. While we are gone they collect our mail and take in our newspaper. More than one stake or ward member who had hoped to stick something in the mailbox unnoticed has gone away unnerved by suspicious stares.

One Fourth of July we used the holiday to tear out our kitchen in preparation for remodeling. Early that morning the woman next door yelled, "Hey, you got a chicken you want us to throw on the grill for you?" I gratefully

removed a chicken from the freezer and promptly forgot about it until about noon, when her children appeared at the door carrying not only our barbecued fowl but also a generous portion of spareribs and dishes of baked beans and potato salad. We receive this kind of hospitality all the time from various families on the street. In return we deluge them with surplus zucchini and tomatoes, which they, innocent nongardeners that they are, appreciate very much.

At first when our neighbors talked we could hardly understand them, but now we communicate quite well. I can't tell if it is because we have learned to understand jive or if they considerately speak to us in English.

The only problem is, our neighbors are too busy to listen to the gospel. One woman has taken a couple of missionary lessons — and fully intends to do something about it someday when she has time. All of them are highly involved in their own churches. We have no monopoly on dashing off to this meeting or that activity. Invitations to Relief Society work meetings, dinners, or programs are welcomed with enthusiasm and smiles, but something always seems to come up. One exception is the teenagers to the south, who attend fire-sides and youth activities with some regularity, but always at the expense of their many school activities and at the whim of their mother. Many members of the Church, therefore, see no visible missionary results from our experiment.

"So I hear you've bought a home," said one ward member. "Is this in a partially white neighborhood?"

"It is now!" Roy laughed.

"Well, when our daughter was young we had a home down there, too," he recalled. "But when the area started, you know, *changing*, we bought the house we have now, and moved to the north end of the ward. And it has paid off. Our son-in-law is a bishop now, you know."

I privately wondered what moving to an expensive (and white) neighborhood had to do with the girl's marrying a future bishop but decided not to antagonize the man. A fellow we knew in the Young Adult program remarked, "Shinetown, huh? You couldn't pay me to go there."

More subtle racism takes the form of amazement at "how wonderful it is to be here among the blacks" (Koreans, Spanish, Filipinos, etc.) "How come he got to go on like that?" demands a young black woman angrily as a visiting dignitary announces that if he had a choice of any ward in the world to live in, he would choose Wilshire Ward. It seems to us that he does have a choice. And he lives in Bountiful, Utah.

Other reactions have been more favorable. When I told the stake president's wife about our decision to move south, she said, "Well, good for you. I believe it's time for people to take a stand." The stake president's family (who live on the rich side of the stake) have indeed taken their stand. Against a rising trend, both in and out of the Church, they have left their children in public schools. That is a decision which requires considerable courage in Los Angeles, especially for those who can afford to do otherwise. Even if a parent is not afraid that his child will be bused, or (heaven forbid!) have to sit next to a minority student in class, the public schools have a reputation of dubious quality and of operating on the verge of bankruptcy.

This family feels that the children are receiving a quality education in the public schools. The parents work very hard to be sure it continues by being curriculum watchers and serving on community-school advisory councils and in the PTA.

People keep asking us what we are going to do about schools when the time comes — our oldest child, six months when we moved in, will soon be four. This is a valid question, because the schools are a major reason why many young families leave the inner city. We don't know what we are going to do, but we'll probably just brazen it out. The schools don't look all *that* bad, especially if you're not searching the crowd for Caucasian faces.

I have tried to formulate a philosophy, concerning the school system as well as our personal safety, which I use in the speech I give to all the BYU-fresh innocents who constantly land in our ward and try to scramble back out as soon as they can. It goes like this: "If we stay here, and serve the Lord with all diligence where he needs us so badly, then the Lord will look after us, answer our prayers, and provide for our needs." This article of personal faith has been of great comfort to me. I hope it will sustain me through the future.

Many who have firmly planted their feet and are striving to give service to the Lord in his Los Angeles vineyard argue that it doesn't matter where one raises one's children as long as the family remains strong and the parents are committed to working and playing with their children. Public education can and should be enriched at home. This view makes good sense for those with fortitude and is confirmed by the mental and spiritual health of their children. These youngsters make a great contribution in their schools and neighborhoods, and in our struggling Mutuels and Primaries. Their parents labor long and hard both with their families and in the Church — hoping against hope that their herculean efforts will hold things together until help arrives or things improve.

One problem is such families are few and far between. It becomes more and more infuriating to me to hear a young middle-class couple — someone beginning a family like ours — bellyaching about the high price of real estate in Los Angeles. If we proffer our solution, the answer is always the same: "Well, it would be okay if I were alone — for myself I don't mind living next to blacks — but my wife/husband/in-laws would *never* go for it!" There seems to be a real paucity in the Church, I catch myself fuming, of people who have the courage of their faith. They will perhaps shake the hand of a new minority convert. Maybe they will even go once a month to hometeach her. But live next to one of them? Have one over for dinner? Let their daughter or son marry one? And I remind myself that I may not be able to predict my own future tests.

When the revelation to admit blacks to the priesthood was announced, my first reaction was unbounded joy. My second was a fierce fear: the last days were indeed upon us; the wheat would truly be sifted from the tares. But there was no mass exodus of hypocrites from the Church. Most of those who had dragged along before kept limping on. The sifting, however, went on too.

There were a few black members in the ward before the revelation. One young family has recently moved into Southwest Los Angeles, a.k.a. the Watts

Branch, where we hear they have assumed heavy leadership responsibilities. Another sister, an older woman of many, many years membership, takes the challenges of being a black in the Mormon church quite lightly. I knew she would appreciate the nylons my husband had picked up for me at the local twenty-four-hour market (where they also book races and write bail bonds). Unable to find the specified beige or nude, he had dutifully returned with “suntan” stockings explaining, “It looks like only black ladies buy stockings there.”

This sister examined my legs critically and grinned, “Well, you still look pretty pale to me. Coffee. Coffee is the color *we* wear.”

I long for the same easy grace, find myself wearied by my own anger at racism in our ward, and sting with shame to find myself unexpectedly guilty.

Visiting General Authorities at nearly every stake conference tell us that Salt Lake is watching our stake and especially our ward, hoping that minorities will be prepared to carry the gospel to their own people throughout the world. We love the challenge. We are proud of the success we’ve seen. We welcome the two Spanish wards, the Korean branch, and the Chinese branch formed in the last five or ten years. Yet anytime a piece of equipment in our building is missing or out of order, the Third Ward (Spanish-speaking) is automatically suspect.

“Phew, Koreans; they sure stink,” says one sister loudly as she and I stand in the foyer. I am horrified. The Korean men could not have helped hearing. I hope they do not speak English as I exclaim, “I can’t believe you said that! You must have hurt their feelings!”

“Well, they do stink,” she insists stubbornly, putting out her lower lip.

The Young Women president and I visit an inactive Samoan family to invite the daughters to our volleyball tournament. We are greeted with reserve and sit uneasily on the mats. “Are you Tongan?” the president asks. The atmosphere freezes. On the way home I explain, “Samoans and Tongans have a very strong traditional rivalry. It was a mistake to bring that up. If you are not sure, it is better to say nothing.”

“Well, I cannot tell these people apart. To me they all look the same.”

“But think how you would feel if they called you a Mexican.”

“I am *not* a Mexican. My country is very different. We are all different in Central America.”

“But they don’t know that.”

She looks at me blankly. No connection has been made.

Late one night the next-door neighbors were hammering in what I guessed was their dining room, and a ladder fell through the window. They nailed a piece of plywood over the broken glass. I glared at that patch all week. “Well,” I thought, “there goes the neighborhood.” Early the next Saturday morning, the gentleman of the house installed a shining new pane of glass. Through it I could see the freshly painted walls and the new furniture proudly centered in the room.

“I hope this naked window doesn’t bother you,” said the wife. “The new drapes should be hung in a few days.” (We ourselves have now been two years without dining room drapes.)

My husband invited the bishop of Third Ward to speak in sacrament meeting. His address, an invitation to brotherhood, stirs me and I resolve to do more, to greet Third Warders in friendly Spanish as we meet. "He does speak good English for a Mexican," I overhear one elderly lady say. The bishop, a highly-educated systems analyst, is from Peru.

A large contingent from Wilshire Ward attending the World Conference on Records included Thelma, a young black woman convert of about a year, one of my visiting teachers. At the conference she took up with the Genesis Group, kissed Alex Haley, and was greatly inspired by the Afro-American research seminars. The highlight of her trip, however, happened when she sat down in a Native American lecture. A woman glared at her blackness. "What are *you* doing here?"

"I thought I'd come hear the lecture," said our unflappable convert. "What are you doing here?"

"I have Indian blood in *me!*" replied the woman proudly.

"So do I," retorted Thelma cheerfully. "Don't you go judging people by how they look."

It seems a miracle that I know of only one couple who became inactive because they felt discriminated against within the Church. Weak testimony, burn-out (I have always maintained that the best way to scare off a brand-new convert is to give her a calling in the Mutual), lack of commitment perhaps due to inadequate teaching or insufficient fellowshipping account for most. In general, however, it is my experience that those who make the slightest effort to belong fit right in, are welcomed, included, and loved.

But what of the future? One young black girl investigated for months, not willing to make a commitment for baptism, because she took the gospel very seriously but could see few black men in the Church. Once she joined, she became one of the stalwarts of our Mia Maid class but there is no corresponding Explorer contingent. She lives with the frustration and sees little promise of change.

The majority of our converts have been women, most of them single, many with young children. The elders quorum is spread mighty thin. The Church simply does not have a workable solution to this demographic imbalance, and surely our ward is not the only one with the problem.

But the problem goes further. I wonder when the Church will acknowledge the life situations these women face in a realistic way. They are not innocent girls cuddled by the MIA into dreams of housewifely bliss. They have seen a fair amount of life. The economic realities of supporting themselves and their children (and often a husband, too) make staying at home a luxury they cannot afford. Those who so easily pronounce answers from pulpits seldom have heard their questions. These women have come up from slavery in their own lifetimes. They do not count on a future of homemaking and motherhood with just a little hobby on the side to keep the screaming meemies away. The New Woman (having put away the old woman through baptism) has discovered her potential for godhood. She is studying the gospel harder and faster than the elders who teach her. Keen-thinking, take-charge women

are coming into the Church; their needs and their capabilities are exploding the confines of traditional priesthood and Relief Society attitudes and policies.

For us, having made a decision about Wilshire Ward has not prevented other decisions from coming up. My husband and I know of a small town which would make a wonderful home. We fantasize about life there — clean air, quietude. I would thump my typewriter in the clean shade of an orange tree, throw scratch to the chickens, and make chokecherry jelly. We know we would not escape responsibility in the kingdom by joining that small, new ward; but must we be forever pioneers and colonists? Where would the Lord have us serve? And how much is enough? Sometimes the struggle here is very lonely and exhausting.

Wilshire Ward revolves around a strong core of older members, people who were in their teens and newly married when our chapel was built. They have given years and years of dedicated service. Some still strive continually; others have slipped into the complacency old age sometimes brings. Still others no longer have the physical strength to serve as they would wish. Some attend the meetings dreaming of the ward's golden age, already half a century in the past, but bear monthly testimony of the stained glass windows. A new golden age is dawning. Ten years from now those people will all be dead, and Wilshire Ward will be almost all black. Hopefully a strong contingent of new priesthood bearers will have entered the Church and the chapel. The women are here already. And, despite the lure of the orange tree, we probably will be too.