In the book, "Peter Pan" by J. M. Barrie we find an island full of lost boys. At one time, they were part of larger families, but somehow became lost to those families, and ended up in Neverland. Every social group has its "lost boys," those who still technically belong, but have slipped into obscurity, and now they may as well be invisible. I refer to those who have disappeared in plain sight as suffering from Lost Boy syndrome.

Where do they come from? At one point in my life, I had a daughter I referred to as my lost child. There was so much going on with everyone else that she just sort of faded into the background. Once I lost her it was years before I got her back again. In the gospel of Christ we have many discussions about finding these lost people, often referred to as the "one," referring to the one sheep who has wandered away from the ninety and nine.

Disappearing is one thing if someone notices you are "gone," but what about those of us in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who are "lost boys," who are invisible in plain sight, and no one notices we are "gone?" We come to church, participate, and do our duty, but have become, or at least feel like we have become, invisible. This is not necessarily the fault of anyone in the Church. Sometimes we become invisible because we don't fit into a predefined category that gets attention from the leaders and organizations of the ward or stake.

Someone wrote to me and said that they were struggling because they were empty-nesters, having just had their last child leave home. Empty-nesters aren't old enough to be retired yet, but are old enough to have lost all their children to their new lives as adults. This couple's complaint is that all the emphasis is on the youth and the primary or on the widows of the ward. This couple has fallen between the cracks and feel like there is no place for them anymore.

Who are the Lost Boys?

This same story can be said of the youth who are different from the other youth and do not feel like they fit in. They feel lonely and invisible. There are those youth who come from broken homes and are trying to fit in with young people who come from healthier homes and who have emotional resources not available to those from less advantaged homes. There are those of the LGBTQ or other groups who feel marginalized or forgotten. And let's not forget all those who have medical conditions in the family that keep them, and others in their family, away from Church activities. The list can be virtually endless.

I'm sure you can think of additional categories of those who do not, for one reason or another, feel they fit in. They feel outside the system and don't know how to feel accepted. What is the cause, and what can be done to help these people feel like they are a valuable part of the kingdom, which they are?

How are Lost Boys created?

I was raised in a military home. We moved regularly when I was growing up. I never knew anyone more than a couple of years at a time. I rarely even saw cousins, except when we drove through their town or at a reunion. Otherwise, it was just "us kids" at home. I know what it feels like to be the outsider all the time. I also know that people often don't know how to be inclusive in their behavior, especially if they have lived in the same place all their lives. Being inclusive is a social skill that each of us should learn at some point. I don't think people are deliberately excluding anyone. Some just haven't learned how to spot those that aren't being included or are absent.

Sometimes we get focused on the group over which we are given stewardship, and the other categories of people just sort of aren't thought about. And sometimes we belong to a group of friends or like-minded Saints, and we are enjoying the group so much we lose sight of those who are on the outside wishing to be invited in. The phrase "out of sight, out of mind" is appropriate here. Chalk it up to human nature.

The programs of the church do focus on the youth and the widows. The youth are still in training and need a great deal of attention. If the church cannot keep them active through their schooling and young adult years there is a high likelihood that we will lose those people for many years to come, bringing great sorrow to those who lose their way and making it difficult to win them back as adults. We are commanded to care for

the elderly (widows) by the Lord. This includes those widowers who need help as well. In today's ever-changing society, we should also include all the single sisters and single mothers/fathers as well. Those are some pretty big groups to care for.

Can you see how becoming invisible is easy to do? Even if you are in a highly visible group like the youth, you can still fade into the background and become a Lost Boy (or Lost Girl). Sometimes this is done by choice through choosing to focus on one person and not another, while sometimes it happens because we are so busy with our own lives we no longer think about someone else's needs.

Some of us become Lost Boys just because we enter another stage in life that doesn't happen to be a focus of attention and resources in the Church. It is no one's fault, it just happens. Sometimes it is because we are timid or shy, or we happen to associate ourselves with a group that makes others uncomfortable to be around. There are many reasons for people becoming invisible to others. This is not a simple situation with a simple fix. It is not uncommon for someone to become a Lost Boy at one time of their life, but come back into the mainstream of activity at another part of their life. This may happen more than once in a lifetime. Just ask any teenager, elderly, or homebound member.

Empty nesters

We know that the bulk of the resources of the ward goes to the Primary and the Youth. And we are regularly reminded not to forget the widow. So who is left to do the needed shepherding to find those who have vanished? Well, let's see, there are the young married families who are having all the children. They are pretty busy between schooling, budding careers, and burgeoning families. There are the middle-aged parents who still have teen-aged children, and they almost always need help, so they are often unavailable. There are the retirees, but many of them are going on missions or their health is no longer what it used to be.

But there is a small, but significant part of the ward who can help and assist in this great work of finding those who are lost - the empty-nesters. Remember them? Their concerns are what started this whole conversation. The advantages of the empty-nesters are legion. They are still in the flower of their life. Their children have left home, but they aren't yet ready to go on missions. They are mature in the gospel and

knowledgeable in the ways of church government. This is a perfect time for them to serve others. They can volunteer to help in the Primary, or assist in the youth programs as seminary teachers or as accompanying adults on activities, etc. They can help shepherd young women/men who are feeling left out and who don't have a parent to go with them on activities. They can fulfill temple and ward callings without the restrictions of those who have children at home.

My point to the empty nesters who may be feeling lost in the shuffle is this; we all have times in life when we feel like we have become invisible, but we have the power to become visible again. If my Bishop is not aware of my availability for service, it would be a great boon to him, and the ward, if I were to go and say, "Here I am. Use me!" instead of staying hidden in the shadows and feeling left out. During these years of "in between" when our children are away, and we are still working, we should be at the height of our usefulness in the kingdom. We have energy, resources, time, and knowledge. Pick an organization and volunteer.

There are plenty of youth who need an adult who cares about them, and can use some direction in life. There are plenty of mothers without husbands who could use an attentive ministering brother or sister. There are plenty of widows and widowers who are having problems with health and general age-related issues who could use some assistance around the house now and again. There are families to fellowship, missionaries to support, missionary, family history, and temple work to do. And let's not forget the ever-present need to clean and care for the chapel.

Final Thoughts

I certainly don't have the answer to everyone's invisibility problems. I learned at a young age that if I didn't stick out my hand and say hello in a new place, I would likely go home without having spoken to anyone. That was true at school or church. No one has to remain invisible or lost if they don't want to. This is my point, in case I haven't made it clear yet. We are all invisible Lost Boys at some point in our lives, but in the gospel of Christ we need not stay that way. If we remain lost it is because we choose to remain lost.

If you are feeling lost at Church, especially if you are naturally on the shy side, you may have to seek for the courage to be more open about making friends. Serve where your

schedule, and resources allow. Being aware that some people may feel lost or alone can help you identify them in a crowd. Be a friend to them. Look for those who sit by themselves or arrive late and leave early. These are both good signs that something may be up.

Pray about what you can do. Let the Spirit help you find things to do and places to serve. Talk to your leaders and let them know you are available, even if only in limited ways. They have probably been praying for you to show up, without knowing it was you. There is joy in service. Go get happy.

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How to Handle Lost Boy Syndrome