

How Do You Spell Relief? A Panel of Relief Society Presidents

Introduction

Sharon Lee Swenson

THE IDEA FOR THIS PANEL SPRANG FROM LAST YEAR'S western Pilgrimage reunion, an annual meeting of women. We were sitting around observing who'd become a Relief Society president and being amazed. We tried to figure out what it could possibly mean and came to no conclusion but decided it would be interesting to talk about.

Well, it *has* been interesting. Planning it was interesting. Maureen kept going to England and the other two women live in Chicago, so all the plans for tidy coordination lapsed into the more usual mode of winging it — or going by the Spirit. Our current definition of what we're doing on this panel is that each woman will talk about some aspect of being a Relief Society president that she chooses. Let me assure you, that whatever you thought a Relief Society president was, you're wrong.

The Life and Times of One Relief Society President

Maureen Ursenbach Beecher

For over a decade prior to my calling as a ward Relief Society president I had researched and written about the history of the organization and its women. Eliza R. Snow and her sisters of the "female hierarchy" were women I knew and loved. To be called to participate in the twentieth century continuation of their work was, as my kids would say, "awesome." To discover the meaning of my call, I turned to the roots of the tree whose branches have spread so far, whose fruits I hoped to taste.

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Still Canadian at heart, MAUREEN URSENBACH BEECHER lives now in Salt Lake City with her husband Dale and her children Dan and Bronwen. She is an English faculty member at Brigham Young University and is affiliated there with the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute. She has survived eighteen months as Relief Society president of the Colonial Hills Ward.

The ordering of a constitution for their new sewing society was the first official act of the group of Nauvoo women gathered in Sarah Kimball's parlor in March 1842. Sensing its importance, Eliza Snow showed her draft document to Joseph Smith, who praised it highly but rejected both Eliza's constitution and Sarah's sewing circle in favor of the Relief Society which he organized the following Thursday. The society, he then instructed, should operate not according to a single written document but on the double base of precedent and present circumstance. "The minutes of your meetings will be precedents for you to act upon — your Constitution and law," he said at their organizational meeting. He also enjoined what he termed elsewhere a "living constitution": "Let this presidency serve as a constitution — all their decisions be considered law; and acted upon as such," he said (Minutes, 17 March 1842).

When I was called to be a ward Relief Society president, I accepted both injunctions: to ensure continuation of the established traditions of the society, but also to override precedent as circumstances demand. The tension between the two approaches has made our presidency examine each decision carefully. As Elder Boyd K. Packer warned in a 1984 address, "There is a temptation to try to solve problems by changing boundaries, altering programs [or] reorganizing the leadership." But he also stressed, "There is a spiritual ingredient not found in the handbooks that you must include in your ministry if you are to please the Lord."

The conservative mandate I took from what I consider to be the most significant set of revelations to women: the minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo and Doctrine and Covenants 25 to which the minutes refer. As spelled out by Joseph Smith and recorded in the Relief Society minutes on 17 March 1842, the purpose of the society was to "look to the wants of the poor." The women were, however, "not only to relieve the poor, but to save souls." Currently, General Relief Society President Barbara Winder has reiterated those same purposes in her own statement of the mission of Relief Society. The organization "helps women give compassionate service," she wrote, and also "helps women build faith and testimony" (1986a, 4, 7). The "increased emphasis on gospel study and its implementation in our lives" recommended by Sister Winder brings the purposes of the present society ever closer to the Prophet Joseph's injunctions to the Nauvoo society. He said, "The object is to make those not so good, equal with the good," and "their principles are to practice holiness." And those two directives of the Prophet on 26 May and 31 August 1842 line up exactly with the mandate Bishop Michael Lowe gave me when I was called to preside over the Colonial Hills Ward Relief Society in July 1986. "Make a Helen Alldredge out of every woman in this ward," he said, referring to the insatiable drive of that good ward member to perform works of charity; and "create an atmosphere for spiritual growth of the women of the ward," referring to an earlier anonymous survey which revealed a shockingly small incidence of what might be called "spiritual experiences" among the ward members.

The Prophet Joseph in Nauvoo, Barbara Winder in the Women's Building, and Bishop Lowe in my own ward, each with a righteous claim to divine

instruction, spoke to me clearly, and the Spirit confirmed their message. Our stewardship in looking to the well-being of the women of the ward is a shared one.

And so with a background of more than a decade of considering women's issues and Relief Society history, my once angry feminism calmed to a rational level, and with the aid of a good staff, I was ready. My close friend Sharon Swenson, as feminist as I and even more susceptible to professional overload, was already succeeding splendidly in that office. Cathy Stokes, less than a decade in the Church, was presiding over a Chicago Relief Society, using initiative and clear vision in what might seem a cut-and-dried organization.

Just as whisperings in my soul had told me of the coming responsibility three months before my calling, so I was assured the day after I was sustained that where I was ignorant, the Spirit would teach me. That day, immediately after we had served one funeral luncheon, Bishop Lowe called to say that Brother Leonard had just died.

"Will you be seeing the family tonight?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Then you'll tell us what we should do?"

"I'll call you later."

Relieved, I hung up the phone. But something was not right; what else could I do? I reasoned. Even as my mind was still pondering the possibilities, my dungaree-clad body was on my old three-speed bike pedaling over to Sister Leonard's house. I hardly knew this refined and cultured lady, but my arms reached out to enfold her small body in my ample one, and we wept together. It was late afternoon, and the family was gathering. Instinct, or the Spirit, told me what my Relief Society president mother would have known and done automatically. "We'll have dinner for you all here within the hour. Is there anything else you need?" I raided the supper tables of both counselors and our wonderful Sister Alldredge — I have become shameless in my demands for sacrifice from our women — and returned bearing food and the love of the ward. It was wrong, I know now. I should have called Bea's visiting teachers and given them that privilege; but the Spirit had some things to teach me. We would work on visiting teaching later.

I come from a line of Relief Society presidents. I was raised under quilt frames and on long walks with my mother to visit sisters who always seemed to live miles beyond the end of the street car lines. My grandmother Mildred Harvey presided over the Lethbridge Stake Relief Society in the early 1900s, which meant she and her counselors would drive team and wagon over prairie roads to visit their wards. While reading the *Woman's Exponent* a few weeks ago, I found great-grandmother Anne Harvey listed in the presidency of a Relief Society in Heber City in 1873 (1 Jan. 1873, 114). However, despite these involved ancestors, the spirit of Relief Society, as Goethe said of all good things, must be earned anew by all who would possess it.

The timing of my calling was perfect for me. Barbara Winder and the general Relief Society were soon to implement a new policy freeing local leaders from the constraints of a centrally established schedule and encouraging

“greater simplicity, flexibility and adaptability” in the curriculum (Winder 1986, 75). My study of Mormon women’s history had convinced me that unless otherwise restrained, women will perceive societal needs and solve them. As diverse as Latter-day Saints are worldwide, we function more effectively at the local level when given general direction but not bound by detailed instructions from the Women’s Building downtown.

I took lessons in administration from the nineteenth-century Mormon women about whom I had read and written. When Brigham Young asked Mary Isabella Horne to “lead out” in teaching her sisters the principles of retrenchment, she sought advice from General Relief Society President Eliza R. Snow, clarified her calling once with President Young, and then created an organization which crossed ward boundaries and continued as a precursor to the later general boards for several years. The structure was not the usual pyramid of president, two counselors, and staff, but one more conducive to networking than to delegating: a titular president and seven counselors, one of whom was Sister Snow. During the period in the 1870s and 1880s when Sister Snow had no counselors, no general board, and no budget, that Retrenchment group served as the means by which the women spread their gospel of good works throughout the Church. Its effectiveness had not yet been fully assessed in print; perhaps the forthcoming history of the Relief Society by Jill Mulvay Derr and Janath Cannon will fill that gap.

Unconsciously at first, we Colonial Hills Ward women followed the Retrenchment model. Our presidency, consisting of a president, two counselors, a secretary, and a treasurer, never sits as a governing phalanx at the front of Relief Society attenders in neat rows. Only the woman conducting stands at the front, with a secretary sitting nearby to take roll. The rest of us are among the women, making use of the little time at the beginning and end of our precious fifty minutes to take care of bits of business and to touch and hear our sisters. We have changed the seating arrangements, too. Our long narrow room, shaped like a cathedral where a mitred priest would preach to a remote congregation, has been rearranged sideways with the women forming a semi-circle around the discussion leader. A baby row is near the door, yet still just a few feet from the teacher. This arrangement, I realize now, is a physical expression of the underlying philosophy of what needs to happen in Relief Society: women talking together openly, honestly, equally, and intimately.

The meetings of that nineteenth-century Retrenchment Society consisted for the most part of testimony bearing, perhaps more like a Quaker meeting, wherein the women shared their concerns, their dedication, their lives. In and around the testimonies, they discussed the tasks of social action, committing themselves in that context. We have tried in our ward to replicate that informality, to give opportunities for voluntary service rather than assignment and follow-through. Sometimes it works. For the rest we go back to the corporate model. Sometimes that works.

The acts of Christian caring which past secretaries used to tally at each meeting as “compassionate service” go on daily in our ward. Sometimes I hear about it; I seldom need to be involved. One woman leaves her ailing husband

to take her widowed friends shopping. Another picks up cinnamon rolls (“These are her favorites”) and drives to Sandy to visit a neighbor now confined in her daughter’s home. Child care is swapped readily among the younger women. Several twosomes walk or run together regularly, hearing each other’s problems. One seventy-year-old widow has a regular route of others to bring to every function. One back-injured man had his lunch brought in regularly so his wife could work a full day without interruption. A ninety-year-old woman was aided to and from bed by a home teacher so she could stay at home with her ninety-two-year-old husband. The former high priest group leader organized a team to provide support for a member whose dying lasted two years, and the Relief Society arranged for palliative care at home for the man’s widow when cancer took her a year or two later. Recently two women underwent surgery the same day, and the ward united in fasting and prayer; the one’s suspected cancer was diagnosed as benign, and the heart patient was home eight days later. It would have been seven, but too many visitors on Sunday had weakened her! The people in our ward care for each other.

Our stake has few obvious problems. It is encompassed by political District Six, which has the lowest incidence of crime in Salt Lake City (“Council” n.d.). The neighborhood elementary school showed the first grade average scores on standardized achievement tests to be in the 84th percentile (Borovatz 1981). The streets are clean, the trees large and shady; the houses, though forty-odd years old, are well maintained. There is no industry close by; the one small grocery store which serves as the community center is, by virtue of a couple of video games stashed behind the grocery carts, a safe teen-age hang-out. When I referred to our neighborhood as “middle class,” I was corrected by a neighbor who modestly proposed that “there are some who would think it *upper* middle class.” But to my knowledge there are only two swimming pools within our ward boundaries, and more Dodge mini-vans than BMWs. Sharon Swenson in her transient, central city ward grinds her teeth when I confess I have never filled out a welfare order. Our bishop has never, to my knowledge, been called out of his sleep to bail a ward member out of jail. Our young people have for the most part not been seriously involved with drugs or alcohol. Shaving cream on a neighbor’s car or retaliating toilet paper on the perpetrator’s trees seem to be our worst expressions of tension. Colonial Hills is a nice ward.

Demographically Colonial Hills has its own peculiarities. In comparison with North American LDS Church averages, its proportion of single-headed to married-headed households skews to the side of the single. Where the average for United States and Canadian wards is 68 percent married and 32 percent single, our figures show 63 percent married and 37 percent single-headed households.¹ Of our married households, only half have children at home. Of the single-headed households, fifty-nine have only adults, and just nine have children. All of those nine are headed by women. Of the single women in our ward, I know of only ten that are in the labor force; thirty-four,

¹ Kristen Goodman and Tim Heaton (1986) provide the data against which the Colonial Hills Ward is here measured. Marie Cornwall gave useful suggestions for its application.

or 65 percent, do not work outside of their homes. In the United States and Canada 81 to 86 percent of single Latter-day Saint women are employed; our figure is 35 percent. The disparity is explained, I suppose, by the fact that the median age of our single women is 35 as compared with 24.7 for the Church and 30.0 for the United States generally. In other words, our single women are mostly older, many beyond earning age. Significant to our Relief Society is that we have a greater than average number of widows and married couples with no children at home, a fewer than average number of households with children, and an average number of single-headed families.

Compassionate service sorts of responsibilities for the older women living alone are easy to deal with. Where the visiting teachers fall through, there is always our Helen or the neighbors. One corner of our ward takes such good care of itself I need make only one call to any one woman to check on the well-being of eight widows. The married couples with no children are nearly all retired with comfortable incomes. Our education counselor and her husband travel often with couples or ward groups. Some of these couples serve missions abroad or in neighboring stakes. Basically they all take care of themselves. That leaves two groups which demand Relief Society attention: those married women with children still at home and those single heads of households who have the difficult task of being both nurturer and breadwinner for their children.

One wonders why the first group would present a problem; so much of the Church program has for so long been directed to the needs of two-parent families that it would seem they would be best cared for. But even in a ward so comfortable as ours, where so few are forced to work away from home, things are less than perfect for the young mothers. A survey we took recently, trying to identify needs we could address in homemaking programs, drew disconcerting responses to its last question, "What do you consider your greatest challenge to personal spiritual progress and life satisfaction?" From women identified only as "under 40" came these replies: "Getting enough encouragement from self and others so I feel accepted before God, and worthy to approach him"; and "Human weaknesses, procrastination, criticism"; "Too much to do, not enough time, life is too hurried"; "Getting so tired with taking on too much that I lack in finding needed amounts of quiet time to do my part in letting the spirit be with me." And one response, eloquent in its brevity: "Anger! Unrealistic goals!" How to address these cries for help without adding one more demand on the already too little time is our current challenge.

The "block plan," or consolidated meeting schedule, has made those mothers of young children extremely difficult to reach with Relief Society support. Fewer than ten women in that category can be found on Sunday morning in our Relief Society meeting; the rest who are at church are in Primary or with the Young Women. Those who are not so occupied sometimes stay away, I hear, because when they do come they find no one their age to associate with. In an attempt to encourage our older women to reach out to the younger attenders, a board member pleaded in a mini-spot for them to learn the names of the young women. "To them," she joked, "all of us white-haired ladies look

alike.” To which another of the old guard replied, “To me, all those tall blond ones downstairs look alike!” We laugh and make a little progress. Holding our summertime luncheon in the yard of an eighty-seven-year-old sister bonded a new friendship between the hostess and the twenty-three-year-old homemaking leader.

We try to reach the young mothers in Primary and Young Women; we put displays downstairs where they meet, send notices, deliver programs, plan homemaking classes, even hold retreats when we can find funding and a cabin. But the sad fact that they can never share with us those tender, thoughtful, joyous Sunday meetings cuts them out of the weekly reinforcement of the bonds of sisterhood. Sometimes the Young Women leaders forge close ties among themselves; those who attend Primary preparation meetings under the care of a sensitive president sometimes nurture one another. But the rest move in and out of ward activities without knowing the blessings of sisterhood they could be giving and receiving.

The group which commands our current attention — and we must remember that these “groups” are not groups but individual, unique women who share some circumstances — is the single heads of households with dependent children. In our ward, seven of the nine women who fit this category are divorced, and two others have legal action pending. All seven divorced women are in the work force, and the two others will likely take jobs when their settlements are completed. Three of our single women are totally aloof from the ward; one, after sending her children to us for Primary, attends an appropriate singles ward. Two appear to be content with their single lives; the rest are in more pain than I see in their married or widowed counterparts. Only one comes regularly to Relief Society meetings. One shies away from all contact with our ward, fearing the displeasure of people among whom she grew up.

Despite the love these women feel from individual sisters — neighbors and relatives — they need more. A caring marriage and family therapist has agreed, with our new bishop’s concurrence, to meet with them next month as a group to discuss “Issues of Divorce.” In order that discussion can be open, neither Bishop Shields nor I will attend. Perhaps when we’ve used up our professional “freebie” the women will have discovered enough caring among themselves to continue meeting together. Perhaps not, but it’s worth a try.²

The hidden ills remain: in a ward four city blocks long and two blocks wide, fewer than half of our members of record attend meetings. Unresolved offenses have lain for years beneath the surface of some members’ skins. There is false pride: an older woman with a newly-developed physical infirmity is now unwilling to meet with us, embarrassed lest it be known; another suffered alone for four years, refusing to accept help during her husband’s deterioration with Alzheimer’s disease; a mother went through a winter of anguish over her son’s experiments with drugs without once sharing her pain, not even with another mother whose teen-aged daughter, her values in conflict with those of the family, had recently left home.

² Since this writing the group has continued to meet, drawing on each other and guest speakers for support in their recovery from divorce.

The other half of the people living within our ward boundaries are non-Mormons, not many of whom seem to be clamoring to join the Church. The minister of the nearby Lutheran church commented on incoming parishioners' complaints about standoffishness — ostracism was his term — among the children in this "Mormon dominated environment" (Nilsson 1987).³ Considering President Kimball's prophecy that multitudes would be drawn to the Church because of the actions of our women, we are not succeeding. I must add, however, that we're trying hard. Several families have promoted block parties on various streets, and my Latter-day Saint neighbor takes goodies as often to the non-Mormon (anti-Mormon, actually) women across the street as she does to the sisters she is assigned to visit teach, and is loved in return. Ward support flowed to a non-member family whose father underwent heart surgery; and after the funeral of a much-loved atheist neighbor, the family was fed at the ward.

There we are, then. We are not the *Ensign* model of the system working perfectly, but we are no *Dallas*, either, covering scandals with a veneer of respectability. We have good people, trying to care for each other, with a new, energetic young bishop (it's hard to forgive him for looking like Robert Redford!) who sees beyond programs to the people whose lives they are designed to bless. And Relief Society is an important part of that blessing.

But I forget. This panel is focused on Relief Society *presidents*. What has happened to my life since my calling a year ago? I've learned some things, repented of other things, been challenged beyond my abilities by some things, and been blessed beyond my understanding by other things.

While I learned early that the Lord can guide me if I try to make myself useful, I also discovered that inspiration doesn't come on demand. I remember Steve Christensen confessing that as a bishop he felt inspired in his counseling about half the time; so he retained a psychiatrist for the other half! Knowing that I may indeed be on my own when I make a visit, I have learned to take the risk and leave it to the Lord to decide whether or not to intervene. Where I used to trust only that which I could affirm for myself rationally, I've learned to put even greater confidence in the wordless warmth of the Spirit. Women's gifts, no longer of tongues and hands-on blessings, seem now to be tears, touches, and tenderness. "Who can interpret my tears?" questioned one woman in the warmth of spiritual sharing. I've learned to wait patiently for the Spirit to move "as it listeth." These may be my sisters, but they are more significantly daughters of eternal parents whose love for them is all encompassing.

I've repented, almost, of trying to understand everything and of thinking I can correct every ill, enrich every life. My still ardent feminist friends may not approve, but I no longer need to defend fair and helpless damsels from the dragon institutions that once seemed to swallow us all. I see now a greater

³ The charge cited was couched in a paragraph of observations about life in Utah, some of which were very positive, such as "gratitude for the welcome they've received from their neighbors" and relief that Zion Lutheran church was not listed among the sponsors of an anti-Mormon pamphlet distributed locally.

vision than my earlier view of the Relief Society as an autonomous body whose purpose was to see to the needs of women; I see Relief Society as Joseph Smith saw it, yoked together with priesthood quorums in the service of all. From the women's movement we learned to look closely at the abuses women have suffered, and still suffer. I am aware of abuses yet occurring; but through a new, wide-angled lens, I see the solutions not in women's isolated action, but in the cooperative, egalitarian effort of us all to rectify the wrongs dealt to each of us, to make things better for everyone. That's much harder, and it can happen only in an atmosphere of mutual respect and equal strength.

The challenge, I have learned, is for the whole ward to be involved cooperatively in our generation's crossing of the plains. One ox team, however strong and willing, cannot pull all the wagons. The real need now is to instill in visiting teachers *and* home teachers a hunger for doing good, to open the hearts of women *and* men to receive each other's ministrations and so be blessed. Home teaching is a promising program; so is visiting teaching. But no one has demonstrated convincingly how to make them interface effectively, how to cover all bases without duplicating services. If any ward can learn to do that, ours can.

Rich blessings do come, personal as well as corporate ones: the simple joy in my heart as I greet each of my sisters on Sunday morning; my counselor's baby cuddled in my arms accepting my surrogate nurturing while his mother tends to her duties; my neighbor's inactive husband who calls me "the high priestess" but supports his wife in her Relief Society activities; a woman who shares in testimony meeting her discovery that her husband's illness is terminal and then accepts the loving support that flows out to her. Richest of all is knowing each woman, her abilities and her weaknesses, her triumphs and her peccadillos, and realizing that she knows the same of me, and that we share love, enriched by that knowledge.

"I now turn the key to you in the name of God," said Joseph Smith to the Nauvoo Relief Society on 28 April 1842, "and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time." So has it been, and still is. The Lord is with us yet.

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"Plenty Good Room" in Relief Society

Catherine M. Stokes

I'm Relief Society president in the Hyde Park Ward, Chicago Heights, Illinois Stake. I was baptized 28 April 1979 and was called to be the Relief Society president in August 1983. Up to that point, I'd been Sunday School chorister, nursery leader, single-woman transition member on the stake board, and third counselor in the Relief Society in charge of sisterhood. Not having grown up in the Church, I had no experience to draw on when I was called to be the Relief Society president, but I'd had three Relief Society presidents to observe: Diane Mangum, Jeri Crawford, and Susan Wakefield.

So when I was called to be Relief Society president, I said yes — and then I had to figure out what I'd said yes to. My daughter's reaction was, "They have made a *serious* mistake. You don't have a bouffant hairdo, and you don't do Jello. And besides," she said, "Relief Society presidents smile all the time and have to take everything. You may smile, but you don't take *anything* from *anyone*. This is not going to work."

While I was turning my calling over in my mind and struggling to understand it, I got an answer to my questions in the form of a song. An old spiritual says,

There's plenty good room,
Plenty good room,
Plenty good room in my Father's kingdom.
There's plenty good room,
Plenty good room,
So choose your seat and sit down.

I decided that the Relief Society should be a place and a condition of "plenty good room" for the women in our area. We have descendants of the founding fathers and mothers of the Church as well as converts who joined the Church all the way from childhood to their seventies. We have welfare recipients and the very, very affluent. We have postdoctoral students and a sister who is learning to read. We have a member whose first trip out of Chicago was going on a single adult activity and those who have traveled

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worldwide. The men in the ward speak German, Japanese, Italian, Swedish, and several varieties of English. The sisters provide French, Spanish, Cantonese, signing for the deaf, and several varieties of English. In terms of ethnics, we have Samoans, Chinese, blacks, Jamaicans (there *is* a difference), Caucasians of all flavors, Spanish, Mexican, and a deaf group inherited from another stake. On a given Sunday in Relief Society, you may see translating in French, Spanish, and Cantonese, and signing for the deaf.

As for occupations, we have secretaries and all those traditional occupations for women, a college vice president, a lawyer, postdoctoral and doctoral students, women with a variety of masters' degrees, homemakers with and without degrees — we have it all.

The question of career versus homemaker is not an issue. Everyone works—either inside or outside the home or both. We had a temple assignment during the week which we were not able to fill because all of the women with temple recommends were either working outside the home or tending children—their own and others'—inside their homes. Now we trade with wards that have more flexibility that way, and we serve on Saturday temple assignments.

I looked at this range of needs and abilities and thought about how an organization could be structured to meet those needs—especially an organization *I* was in charge of. My daughter was only partially right. I *do do* Jello when the occasion demands, I don't have a bouffant hairdo, and I may accept some but not too much that I consider unnecessary from anyone. I felt pretty strongly that I should not waste any time trying to fit myself to the job; instead, I should try to fit the job to me and my time constraints. I work full-time between two cities, so I only have time to spend on pursuits of value.

The organizational problem was the first one. Susan Wakefield, whose third counselor I had been, gave me a very valuable insight about the organizational structure of the Relief Society: We say that the most important function is compassionate service; however, compassionate service is not explicitly represented in the presidency. You have a counselor for education, who deals with Sunday meetings, and a counselor for Homemaking meetings, which happen once a month, but your visiting teaching/compassionate service person is tucked way over yonder reporting to the president on a dotted line. Under the most recent development, this function is even split between two women.

To strengthen that structural integrity in the organization, I would have the education counselor handle both Sunday meetings and Homemaking meetings, while the other counselor would be directly in charge of visiting teaching and compassionate service. Or have three counselors.

To communicate the importance of compassionate service within the existing structure, I got the best woman in the ward for visiting teaching coordinator, and I spent as much time with her as I did with the counselors. I delegated as much as possible, remained available, reviewed what came back—and hoped I'd created a healthy, successful program. I had a couple of guidelines on assigning visiting teaching companions: new converts with experienced members, and black sisters with white (we have about 30 percent black mem-

bers of Relief Society). Then the visiting teaching coordinator pretty well handled it by herself.

I never focused on the percentages of visits. I knew that they were usually very high but dipped when the whole ward turned over with the school year, but I let the coordinator and her assistants handle all of that, too.

We sometimes had to “stretch” the definition of a visit. The manual says two women have to be in the visitee’s home giving her the prepared message. Well, that’s not always workable. We decided that as long as there was some activity the companions and visitee agreed on (shopping, tending kids, going to the temple) *and* a gospel discussion, that was a visit.

Once the presidency had “jelled,” I thought we should be spending our time visiting the sisters, rather than in meetings, when a lot can be handled by phone. We have few board meetings, but each department meets as often as they feel necessary to deal with their responsibilities.

For a while, we had presidency meetings during Sunday School because of the demands on everyone’s time. The forty-minute time limit kept everybody focused on the agenda. After about a month the Sunday School president approached me and asked, “Are you aware that the Relief Society presidency is erratic in its attendance?” I responded that we were sacrificing some Sunday School class time so that we’d have more time available for family and service. Fortunately, demands quieted down, and we only met occasionally during the Sunday School period.

Unless other responsibilities prevail, I go to Relief Society lessons, but Homemaking is strictly optional. I believe that attendance at Homemaking should be out of interest, not loyalty.

Something else I do to fit the job to me is *not* to visit every newcomer. Usually the crowd of newcomer students hits the fourth Sunday in September, when school starts. Instead of going to their apartments, I invite eight or ten new couples and their children, as well as single members, over to dinner, and I also invite a similar number who have been in the ward for a year or two who live fairly close to the new move-ins. Sometimes I call one of the older members of the ward and say, “Invite So-and-so over to dinner and me too. I want to get to know them.” In the course of the evening, I see the older ward members assume much of the responsibility for getting the new ward members to feel at home. I do that regularly until I have seen most of the new members of the ward.

For new babies, I make house calls. That’s when being the Relief Society president is really fun. I think it’s important that a husband and wife have a date all by themselves fairly soon after the baby comes, so I call as many as I can when the baby is a few weeks old and tell them to schedule an evening. Visiting teachers are also encouraged to do this.

Another fun activity is to have some of the children of the ward — two or three at a time — come and sleep over Friday nights and watch Saturday morning cartoons with me. I started doing this before I was Relief Society president. I believe it’s good for everybody: the children like it, it gives the mothers a break, and I love it. I remember one little girl coming up to me in Church and saying, “We haven’t been to your house for a long time. When

can we come over?" Her mother blushed and tried to shush her, but I just said, "Now, it's all right. It's really all right." Meanwhile I'm thinking that the kids know when they need a break too.

Being Relief Society president just gives me more momentum to put ideas that I have always thought were good into practice. I see the point of what we're supposed to learn as members of the Church as a circle, and the points on the circle are LOVE — LEARN — SERVE. LEARN — SERVE — LOVE. SERVE — LOVE — LEARN. I think these are part of our task as Christians because, as we read the Savior's words, he's telling us to love, to learn, and to serve. They're so interlocked that it's hard to separate them. You could spend a whole symposium on whether you love before you learn or love after you serve or whatever. But if you're at a loss about where to start ("How can I love these people I don't know?") — well, *serve* them to learn about them and you will, inevitably, eventually love them. In the circle of loving, learning, and serving, bonding occurs, just as it does with an infant and parent. As we love our God, we serve him and learn more about him. As we serve him, we love him more and learn more about him. As we learn more about him, we increase both the quality and the quantity of our service to others and in so doing, increase in our love and service to him. That's how I see this "plenty good room" place.

I have done some reading to offset my lack of historical knowledge, and I really do appreciate *Sister Saints* as well as Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton's *The Mormon Experience*. Both books describe bonding experiences among women in the early Church. Women bonded around many of the adversities they shared. During the trek across the plains they helped one another survive, shared meager foodstuffs, gave birth in or under wagons, buried their dead children, wept together. Early in this century the Relief Society ran businesses, established schools, sold wheat to the government, and cared for one another in a variety of ways.

After reading about these powerful bonding experiences among Mormon women, my question became, What do we bond around today? I think that the visiting teaching program is a place for bonding to begin, and I am pleased to see spontaneous service occurring without much encouragement. There's a strong family feeling in our ward because so many people are away from their home and families. Dozens of times, I have found out after the fact what service has been done. I am pleased that nobody seems to think they need the Relief Society president's okay to do something.

I'll give some examples. One sister, a convert, worked at the University of Chicago Medical Center, which, for one reason or another, had a lot of out-of-state LDS patients. She would look them up, take care of their immediate needs, and call me to tell me what the Relief Society needed to do. I always saw that the Relief Society responded. For instance, a car fell on one boy and crushed his head in shop class, and the doctors were putting him back together at the Center. His mother was with him. I was called and told that she was getting awfully tired of hospital food and needed some fellowship. Could we bring her supper every other night for a while? We could and did.

One single mother with several little children and considerable emotional strain had sensitive visiting teachers who arranged three times a week for someone to take care of those children and give her a break. After several months the need no longer existed. The visiting teachers bore their testimonies in tears, telling what a blessing that service had been to themselves.

Single men in the ward do a lot of compassionate service — particularly child care. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to ask them, and nobody ever said no. In fact, the Homemaking counselor arranged for the elders quorum to do the nursery on Homemaking nights. In this way, no woman had to miss the meeting if she wanted to attend.

We do a lot of things as a Relief Society that families might do elsewhere. In addition to funerals we help with wedding receptions. We also organize baby showers for first babies. Everybody helps and generally has a really fine time.

Bonding today has a necessary prerequisite — communication. Tone, body language, and actions change the meaning of the words we use and can create or remove communication barriers between people. I'm most familiar with the communication barriers between black and white people. I hasten to add that not all black and white people — particularly certain socio-economic groups — have these barriers, but generally black and white people have differences in style, delivery, and directness. One problem I have is with the sweet sisters who never tell me exactly what they are talking about. They go all around the point. I have to call someone and ask, "What are they talking about? What are they trying to tell me?"

In a work situation with two female employees, one black and one white, we discussed an assignment that each of them had. The black woman said, "Well, I want to do it this way."

My response was, "Well, you can if you *want to*."

The white employee said, "You said more to her than those words said, because the rest of the message was, 'You can if you want to — if you want to deal with me.'" She was correct.

This reminded me of how subtle language can be. It reminded me of how carefully we need to work with each teacher, reminding her to bring out in discussion what the sisters think she has said, what it means to them.

I'll give another example. The visiting teachers went to visit a recently baptized single woman. They chitchatted, gave the lesson, and did all those other good things they were supposed to do. Then they asked, "Is there something we can do for you?"

This recent convert promptly said, "Sure, you can take me down to the drugstore so I can get a refill on my birth control pills."

Well, the visiting teachers just about lost it, but they kept their cool. When we spoke about it, I agreed, "Yes, there is a problem. The problem is that she doesn't understand the commitment she made when she joined the Church, because the missionaries talk about being morally clean. Well, morally clean may mean whether you steal or murder. Some people don't associate morally clean with sex at all."

At any rate, the sister eventually learned what the commitments were. And when she did, she said, "I cannot live that." Although she's no longer active in the Church, we still visit her and are friends. I feel that there's been some degree of bonding with her.

I'm a lot more sensitive to black-white barriers because of my personal experience, but I recognize there are miscommunications between other ethnic groups as well. A lot of Church members are from the Intermountain West where they've never been close to anybody black. They often encounter blacks with fear and trepidation. Sometimes, if I sense particular fears, I'll take a meal over — one of the few times I do. When these women see somebody standing there holding a meal, saying, "I'm the Relief Society president," it's just like magic. Those four words — "the Relief Society president" — work better than anything else I know.

I encourage all the women to ask questions — any question they're puzzling about. One of the questions I got was, "Why do you black people walk around with Saran Wrap on your heads?" Now that was a legitimate question, and I'm glad she asked it. (The answer is that some blacks who straighten their hair with chemicals put a special conditioner on it, then wear a plastic cap for the maximum benefit. However, wearing the cap in public is a matter of personal taste.) I encourage women to ask questions — to ask me, to ask certain older black women who can handle it, or certain white women whom I designate by name: "If you have questions about what the white folks are doing and I'm not around, call one of these people." I have said it just that directly in front of the Relief Society group. I guess I'd rather risk a mild offense than be misunderstood, because I may never discover the misunderstanding.

We had an experience where an older couple was coming through on the train and the husband had a heart attack. They took him to one of the university hospitals where he promptly died. His wife refused to sign anything until "the Church" came. The elders quorum president called me, and another sister and I went over to get her. "Hello, Sister," I said to this elderly lady from a remote town in Utah. "I'm the Relief Society president." She never blinked. We took her to a member's home, put her up for the night, got an undertaker, and sent her on her way the next day.

I marvel at the clout that the Relief Society president has. You could buy into that and could really get into trouble if you did. I don't think that it's only the priesthood-bearers who are warned against the use of power and unrighteous dominion in D&C 121. I believe it applies to us all — including parents.

Earlier I mentioned my selective attendance at Homemaking meeting. Let me hasten to point out that Homemaking is particularly useful in bridging communication barriers because it gives you things to do together. Some women love Homemaking because they're learning to do things and they think it's just wonderful. We have lectures or other offerings (book reviews, for example) for women who might be mildly disenchanted with homemaking, or we ask them to participate by giving a class or demonstration. When we feel comfortable about exposing what we don't know about each other as

people, interactions move along more quickly in an environment of acceptance.

I have to give you one of my biases about how I function personally and as a president. One of the most important roles that anyone can have is to participate in the rearing and guidance and spiritual development of children. As Latter-day Saints, as members of the household of faith, I believe that the children belong to all of us. I cannot call myself a Christian if I watch a woman come into a room, struggling with a child on each hip and dragging three behind, if I don't get up and take at least one. I think bearing one another's burdens and sharing one another's joys includes the children. I further believe that all women have a unique and primary role in rearing these children, guiding their spiritual development and teaching them to learn, which is what we need to do in this age of information explosion. At the same time, I believe that women have been, are, will be, and should be on the cutting edge of discovery and achievement in literature, science, art, business, philosophy — whatever there is to discover or achieve. I believe that the balancing of these roles is one of our major challenges. If children are to be reared in today's environment, sacrifices have to be made. To make most great things happen in the world, somebody has usually had to give up something and that somebody has usually been somebody's mother. I don't deal with the rightness or wrongness or fairness of that. I'm saying that we have to protect the children.

Relief Society should help us with balancing in our lives. Relief Society should help us with values as we study the scriptures, share experiences, counsel, pray with, and pray for one another. I see our responsibility to preserve the values we believe in, to be role models, witnesses for those values, to preserve what is of value in our faith, cultures, and traditions, for ourselves, for our children, for our society. I believe, further and finally, that we are admirably suited to do this, joyously and with confidence, and without apology, for as it says in 1 Timothy 1:7: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" that we might serve, that we might love, that we might learn.

Relief from What?

K. Carpenter

Preparing these comments about Relief Society has been exciting and difficult. I served as stake Relief Society president in my Chicago stake for two years during construction of the Chicago temple. These years were a unique and a grand time in my life; so I will base my comments on my personal experience with Relief Society and especially on the perspective that I have gained from my stake service.

To begin I must relate an experience I had. Our family took a trip to Fairview Canyon and spent the night in the family cabin. Late in the evening

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as we went outside to tell our college-bound son goodbye, we took time to look up.

Now for those of you who live under mountain skies and glance heavenward after sunset from time to time, maybe this would not have been the stirring experience it was for me. I had forgotten what the heavens looked like! An inspiring, breathtaking vision opened before me. I saw bright stars. I saw clusters. I saw all the diversity of the constellations. I saw the pattern of the Milky Way—I'd forgotten that magnificent galactic pathway even existed! And because my mind had been on Relief Society service preparing for this speech, it was natural to find myself quietly thinking: With this clear, clean vision of the heavens before me, do we have a clear, clean vision of what Relief Society can be?

I remember the words of Joseph Smith when he said: "The Lord and this Society shall rejoice, and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time henceforth; this is the beginning of better days to the poor and needy" (HC 4:607). Thus the officially organized group of Mormon women in that first Nauvoo Relief Society meeting room received the keys to unlock the heavens in behalf of themselves and their sisters.

And I find myself wondering still, since that night in Fairview: Have we retained a clear, expansive vision of the powers that were entrusted to women of that earlier time? Do we remember that those same keys remain in our care to be turned, again and again, in Utah, in Illinois, in Mexico, and one day in the Soviet Union?

I know from my experience in Wilmette Stake that those keys are always available and waiting to be turned. Wilmette Stake has three wards near its north boundaries, in a basically rural, farming area. One of these wards encompasses a neighborhood with a heavy concentration of Navy personnel, who are continually transferring in and out. Then we have two fairly affluent suburban wards, a cosmopolitan mix of stable professional families, singles, and students from Northwestern University. In Chicago there are two city wards, two good-sized Spanish wards, and finally one Polish and one Korean branch. Until recently we also had a deaf branch meeting near our south boundaries, where most members are black.

Coming from Salt Lake, I had brought with me an image of Relief Society operations and activities lifted straight from the safely homogenized, sheltered heartland of Mormondom. I had no idea what a call to leadership might entail in this bewildering mix of scattered wards and subcultures that made up my stake in Chicago. So when I became stake Relief Society president, I looked frantically for a little "black book" to tell me what it was I was supposed to do. There wasn't one.

Instead I discovered that my job was to advise, instruct, and help clarify the vision of those serving in wards and branches under me without impinging on their individual authority or responsibilities; I was to strive for unity of purpose in this wonderful and bewildering diversity—in other words, I was to help turn the keys to meet the needs of the sisters around me in our time and place. To borrow from the title of this panel, I had to discover how I could

learn to “spell ‘relief’ ” — and how I could help other women in Chicago, Illinois, do the same.

I asked my husband while I was preparing this paper, “How do *you* spell ‘relief’?”, and he answered quickly: “R-e-l-e-a-s-e-d.” (And that is just what happened to me when he was called into the stake presidency.) I asked a sister-in-law the same question, and she answered, “c-a-s-s-e-r-o-l-e.” I asked my father-in-law, and he said, “‘Relief’? Are you talking about Relief Society? Does that exist anymore? I thought all these old women’s clubs had disbanded.”

So! I asked myself, “Relief from what?” The obvious answer was relief from suffering. There is a wonderful song in our new hymnbook entitled “As Sisters in Zion.”

As sisters in Zion we’ll all work together . . .
We’ll comfort the weary, we’ll strengthen the weak.
The errand of angels is given to women;
And this is a gift that, as sisters, we claim:
To do whatsoever is gentle and human,
To cheer and to bless in humanity’s name.

Do we, as Latter-day Saint women, respond to this call to relieve suffering humanity?

Throughout our history and in times of catastrophe we seem to have responded well. I recall help proffered by certain stakes to a Jewish relief fund, to Armenian refugees in Constantinople, to the Hoover clothing fund for Europe. And there are others. But what about our commitment as individuals?

I am thinking right now of a woman I heard about in Chicago. She is a North Shore Episcopal lay reader who, bothered by hunger in the world, joined an organization that provides animals for the needy — pigs, chickens, goats, bees, and sheep. She feels, as she explains it, that this kind of charity, which provides food and steady income, promotes self-respect and self-reliance. “We are a development agency,” she insists, “not a relief group.”

Certainly she has found a way to “bless and cheer” humanity — and without any specific instructions from any authority other than her own conscience.

The need for individual service “in humanity’s name” is often least evident when it is close to home. The suffering that surrounds us in our own communities may seem less dramatic than famine in the Third World, but it is just as painful and real. We do provide our famous “casserole” relief in times of crisis but are usually absorbed only by periodic needs of our own.

I noticed a half page that appears regularly in the Salt Lake *Tribune* listing various calls for volunteer help. What a wonderful way to identify community needs! No one is directing us from the pulpit, no one is saying, “you must,” or “you ought to.” One key that Relief Society means to reinforce within us can certainly be applied here: “It is not meet” that we be commanded in all things. And it is not meet, either, that we work only through official Church channels to relieve human suffering.

For each sister today the vision should show relief from selfishness. "To bless and to cheer" means more than relieving physical suffering or deprivation. It means sharing our talents and testimonies, both in and out of our Church callings. It means enriching and developing the lives of others in our schools and in the political community. I am impressed by those in my community who spend innumerable hours and resources serving on school boards and library boards, developing community symphonies, and "doing whatever is gentle and human" to build up the world around them.

I used to have this happy vision of Relief Society sisters meeting to pat each other on the back for wonderful hours of sacrifice and compassionate service. But when I see my non-member neighbors offering their time and help, with no official callings or titles or no gold stars handed out at the end of the month, I realize what we need to learn; and I feel inspired to go out into the community along with these men and women and contribute whatever I can.

How about relief — for ourselves and for those we lead and serve — from the boredom of blind, rote activity? Is this a part of our Relief Society mission? Have we unwittingly fallen into patterns of repetition without relevance? Too often we repeat the same tasks, thoughts, and procedures, the same socially evolved activities, and we carry this static and lifeless attitude into Relief Society. We need the peace to look around us, to see what really needs to be done, what fires need to be kindled, what walks and talks and quiet moments lie waiting to be enjoyed.

In our Church callings as well, we often shift the responsibility for innovation and relevance to "the powers that be" above us — ward or stake leaders, general boards, correlation committees, or General Authorities. Leaving thought and study, observation and prayer, and finally solutions to the challenges to "those in authority" seems easier and less risky than being personally responsible for searching out the unique characteristics and requirements of the groups with which we are working.

Can we, as sisters, inspire each other to awaken and respond creatively, "in humanity's name," to the individuals with whom we work and serve, as parents, spouses, neighbors, teachers, and Church administrators? Our times cry out for this kind of relief.

Sisters of a certain age frequently announce, "I'm not going to Homemaking meetings anymore. I've done it all. I don't need any more unfinished projects." How can we help relieve these women from the burden of their boredom, from the sense that Homemaking projects — or any projects — can only be repetitious, trivial, and valueless? How can we help them see that clear, clean, expansive vision of life and its endless potential? Can we lead them to the awareness that their lives and their homes were meant to be endlessly exciting — and unfinished — projects; that not even God himself has "done it all"?

Can Relief Society provide us relief from reliance on the expectations of others for our identity? In "the world," degrees, titles, and paid positions seem necessary for validity. I frequently hear people ask, "What do women want?" I don't think we're really sure yet. We don't have all the answers, but we do

have something that provides balance as we seek answers. Aided by the words of our prophets and the scriptures, we have the knowledge of our eternal individuality and our divine potential.

In the same vein, do we in Relief Society relieve each other from the burden of living up to labels? Do we feel the need to bestow implicit or explicit titles on each other ("Here's Molly Mormon; here's Jane, the bishop's wife; here's Sister Oakley, our visiting teacher leader; here's my grandmother, the temple worker") before we can accept each other as valuable and interesting individuals? Or do we really value each other as unique, irreplaceable, and multi-dimensional daughters of God?

Tied closely to the relief found by breaking free of cardboard labels and the expectations of nebulous "others" is the quest for relief from ignorance. "What do you think of Relief Society?" I asked my cousin.

"I've had so much fluff," she answered, "that I feel like I'm cotton candy! I'm tired of being manipulated through tears."

I could see her point. There seems to be a trend in recent years towards entertainment as a prime goal in lesson presentation and in Homemaking meetings. I recently happened on a wonderful cartoon: a Relief Society teacher stands, surrounded by flowers, posters, and wordstrips, stammering to the class in front of her, "I — uh — was so busy preparing for my lesson this week that I — uh — forgot to prepare a lesson" (Pat Bagley, *Treasures of Half-Truth*. [Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1986], n.p.).

It doesn't have to be this way. A teacher's lesson preparation can be geared to encourage thoughtful response and preparation from the class. It can encourage thorough home study, so that lessons from the manual become springboards for deeper insights.

We also need to understand that neither gospel scholarship nor gospel insights are fostered by easy emotionalism. Tears can be an honest and inspiring expression of profound love or conviction. But emotional display can also serve as a handy substitute for gospel scholarship — and even for deep emotion.

One day a friend of mine who now lives in Salt Lake went walking with me in Chicago through a Catholic convent garden. We had both been curious for some time about the stations of the cross, which were well displayed that day in the garden around us. As we paused to admire and discuss them, we decided that they must have served originally — and very successfully — as visual aids for the nuns of earlier times, to help them focus on the Savior. Then, as the idea caught on, they gradually became stereotyped fixtures, ends in themselves, no longer a means to achieve the deeper ends of instruction or spiritual insight.

This is something we need to continually guard ourselves against. Latter-day Saints are *not* immune to this kind of idolatry. We need to remember that tears, time-honored quotations, and even visual aids in Relief Society, can, if we lose our perspective, defeat their own ends and become lifeless.

The other day I picked up a copy of the Relief Society manual for next year and began to thumb through it. I liked what I saw. There is excellent potential in the lessons. If we take the responsibility on ourselves, as teachers

and as class participants, to develop and magnify that potential, we should have a great year.

Along with the Relief Society manual, I brought home a copy of the Melchizedek Priesthood manual. Comparing the two books, I observed both are titled *Come Unto Me* and designated as “Personal Study Guides.” This is a first for Relief Society; former manuals have been called “courses of study.” There are, however, some significant differences. First, I noted that the general instructions to the quorum leaders identify the scriptures as the class “manual.” Quorum members are repeatedly encouraged to “study, understand, and apply” the scriptures and are instructed to bring their scriptures for discussion at every meeting. Each priesthood guide contains a Book of Mormon reading schedule, along with a calendar for noting the corresponding lesson schedule so that class members can always come prepared.

The priesthood lessons themselves are flexible and intended for adaptation, according to the needs and backgrounds of the class members, under the inspiration of the leader. Relief Society lessons have some flexibility of order, but not content.

The first lesson in the Relief Society manual also encourages sisters to bring scriptures to class “so they can read and mark the scriptures referred to in each lesson.” Instructions are there, in print, for all. But I somehow sense that while the brethren are strongly encouraged to study, the sisters are given a gentle nudge.

We cannot look to the borrowed light of others’ thought and scholarship to lead us through our own inner journeys. We have good teaching techniques and aids to offer the brethren and lessons to teach them about accepting and expressing their emotions. But we can also learn from their example to seek spirituality through scholarship, beyond posters, wordstrips, and tears.

Linked again to our mission to relieve gospel sleepwalking and ignorance is the call for relief from mediocrity. In Chicago we struggled with ethnic diversity, with age-group diversity, and with the diverse priorities of working women and full-time housewives, many without transportation. In the midst of all these struggles, we were particularly perplexed about what to do with Homemaking meeting. We had received a lot of feedback on this particular meeting. We wanted to make this meeting relevant, helpful, and available to all the groups and individuals involved in our stake Relief Society. After a great deal of pondering and prayer, we decided to use the personal and family preparedness resource wheel in the welfare book as the basic Homemaking “study-guide-cum-manual.”

As the months went by, we began to feel very good about this approach. We could see that it was promoting self-reliance and responsibility among our sisters and their families throughout the stake. So when I visited Salt Lake that year, still flushed with our success, I paid a visit to the Relief Society offices. I had a lovely, informal chat with one of the general counselors, during the course of which I asked her if the general officers would consider changing the name of Homemaking meeting. I had explained to her about the welfare wheel that had met the needs of the sisters in our stake so well; and I won-

dered if some women who might feel alienated by the term “homemaking” would respond with more interest to the themes of practical service and personal and family preparedness.

The counselor didn’t want to change the name from “homemaking.” Everyone comes from some sort of home, she pointed out. “Home” is a universal concept. All right; I could understand that. But our visit was not quite over. “Have you seen our Homemaking display downstairs?” she asked me.

“No,” I said, “I have not.” So she led me to a display room downstairs, and there, in a position of honor, was the welfare wheel, taken from the very same page of the same book that we had used so successfully back home in Wilmette Stake! I like to think that the inspiration that helped us choose this wheel as our theme, after study and prayer, in Chicago came from the same source that inspired its display in Salt Lake.

There are many others ways I have learned to spell “relief” these past few years. There is, especially, the ever-urgent call for relief from loneliness, from alienation and despair. Learning to understand sisterhood and the joy of compassionate visiting teaching is the “errand of angels” here. But the final message that I would like to leave with you is that same image that began this discussion: keys turning in each of our hands to open up the designs and blessings of heaven. Soon I will return to Chicago. And the vision I will catch looking up from my backyard into the night sky will be very different from the vision that awed us the other night outside our cabin in Fairview. It will be very different from what many of you see, looking up from this valley into the stars. But we all must continue to look up. We must strive for that clear, clean, expansive vision of heavenly patterns and purposes; we must continue turning the keys to illuminate the teachings, the works, and ultimate aims of Relief Society.

Our vision and service begin “here,” at home, wherever we stand. Our challenges cannot be neatly solved or precisely outlined in a little black handbook. They are ever-old, ever-new. We read in Philippians 4:11–13: “In whatsoever state I am . . . I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

Using these words from the writings of Paul as our guide, we will continue to look up, seek the visions, and turn the keys that spell “relief” — with all its infinite variations — in whatever time and whatever place we find ourselves, ready always to learn, to suffer, to rejoice, and to serve.

The Amazement of Grace

Sharon Lee Swenson

My ward has 300 women, and over 50 percent are older than sixty. One bishop laughed when he called it “the newlyweds and the nearly deads” be-

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cause the other large group is young couples who are recently married and either renting or buying a first home and establishing their families. The number of people who do canning assignments is pretty small. I think there are about twenty of us, and I get really tired of canning. (We did persas this morning, in case I don't seem to have the usual intellectual aura about me of one who has enjoyed a full morning of Sunstone discussions.)

The presentations to this point have raised a whole range of issues that need to be discussed: How priesthood leaders impact Relief Society, how we impact them, Relief Society as an organizational model, the developing role of the Relief Society, Relief Society in personal lives, and the relationship of the ward and stake Relief Societies.

For my part, I want to speak personally, not institutionally, and focus, not on the program, the sisters, or how well I've done (which seems particularly questionable) but instead on what has happened to me as a Relief Society president. Three kinds of access have opened to me as a result of my calling: access to God and to my Heavenly Mother, access to my sisters, and access to myself. All three types are closely interwoven and connected.

Before I was called, I knew some things about Relief Society presidents. I'd known a lot of them, but I never really loved one until I met Cathy Stokes. I didn't love her because she was a Relief Society president. I just loved *her*. I felt rapport with her and was warmed by the radiance of her love for me, for all other sisters, and for the gospel.

Before I met her, I knew that a Relief Society president had certain qualifications. She was a good cook (Jello was one of her accomplishments), she was well-organized, she always carried a loaf of homemade bread (for which she had ground the wheat herself), she was sweet, and she had a long-suffering spirit. I knew I couldn't even *talk* like a Relief Society president — you know, that coo which parallels the priesthood voice? “It is *so* special to see you sweet sisters today and we want to tell you how much we *appreciate*, etc., etc. . . .”

My feelings about Relief Society presidents were complicated by my feelings about Relief Society itself. I have always believed in eternal and universal sisterhood, so I saw Relief Society as the contemporary expression of that sisterhood. My most recent calling had been Spiritual Living teacher, and I frankly loved it — loved the sisters, loved reading the lesson and trying to figure out how in the world I could ever teach it, and then praying about it and finding ways.

Simultaneously, I was also somewhat critical of what I perceived as weaknesses of Relief Society. It was boring and out of touch with what women were really doing. And in some ways, when I was called I felt that the Lord was calling my bluff: “You don't like it? Fix it.”

A year and a half ago, just after I returned from a retreat with my Retrenchment sisters, the bishop issued this calling. As I heard his words, a bolt of lightning shot through me. I'd never felt anything like it before. It was as if something tingled from the top of my head down to my toes. It was a vivid and confirming witness that the calling was not wishful thinking on the bishop's part nor a hallucination on mine.

My first task was to select counselors. My technique for getting inspiration is to get in my car and drive to Park City. It's virtually infallible, which makes me suspect that God is closer to Park City than Salt Lake City. That first day, my ostensible agenda was counselors, but the underlying question — the real agenda — was, "Do you really want *me* to be a Relief Society president?"

I received the knowledge, "Yes. I want *you*." It was supremely comforting knowledge. Some people talk about the mantle of a calling. I felt the crown of my calling. Let me try and explain what that revelation meant.

All my life, I have felt that someday I would be great and valuable. Someday. Not now, not yet. But someday, I'd do everything just right. I'd be slim, attractive, and soft-spoken, without a semi-lisp and southern Utah drawl. When I opened my dresser drawers, I would see neatly folded clothes with crocheted sachets nestled among them. I would have a spotless refrigerator filled with healthy, delicious food. I'd read poetry and would have abandoned my current need for regulator doses of strong murder mysteries. But I knew I wasn't that person then.

The witness I received on the way to Park City was that the Lord wanted *me* — murder mysteries, mixed-up drawers, and all, complete with failings and weaknesses. I was loved of the Lord and had something important to give my sisters. That something was I, myself, and what I knew — the love I had for them and my knowledge of the Lord. I also understood that I would be a medium for divine love, a channel to tell those women, "The Lord loves you. You have power. Use it."

When I was set apart, I received the keys of my calling. I don't use them often enough, but they are there. I am a chatelaine of spiritual wealth. I turn the keys for my sisters, and I turn keys to them.

I have access to God through direct revelation. He tells me what I need to know when I ask him. When he doesn't, he tells me why he's not going to tell me. I've had a turnover of counselors you wouldn't believe. Our Home-making counselors will not stay in the ward. As soon as we call someone, she promptly feels a need to move. About the third time this happened, I had a list of the ward sisters by me on the seat while I was driving to Park City, and I felt the Spirit say, "This one."

I looked and said, "Are you sure? She's eighty-seven years old."

The Lord said, "Yep. That's her." And it was.

When I had to replace my eighty-seven-year-old counselor, I prayed long and hard and got a name which seemed so amazingly off the wall, even for the Lord, that I said, "I don't know if you're aware of it, but this woman has difficult circumstances right now. I don't think this is the best thing for her right now. I don't even think it's a *good* thing for her right now. And for heaven's sake, think of the organization!"

And the message came back, "Call her."

So I did, and in about six weeks, she said, "I'm leaving the ward."

But the change in her and the change in us because of our interaction with her was profound. I feel that she was at a turning place in her life, on the brink of something potentially dangerous for her. The chance to be with us

and serve her sisters — to take action on behalf of others — helped change the way she looked at herself and at her life. And we came to love her. It was not a wasted six weeks. I learned again that the Lord's inspiration operates with a lot more knowledge than I have.

A part of me has always been desperately anxious to follow the program of the Church, to get the job done right, and to accomplish the Lord's goals — but part of my lesson in humility (or humiliation, I can't tell which) is that I also really wanted to look good myself and wanted counselors that would make me look good. This experience taught me that the Lord knows things I don't and has reasons I'll be able to understand if I act on them in faith.

In addition to this sometimes stunning access to the Lord, access to my sisters has been life-changing for me. When I was called, I was taking a class in feminist literary criticism that drastically rearranged my mind — and soul. I knew that Relief Society would give me access to women that I did not know very well and probably would not voluntarily choose to know better. I have a small circle of intimate friends and have liked to keep it that way. But because of this calling, I now have a reason to be concerned and involved with every woman in our ward. Even learning names is a big job because one-third of the membership changes three times a year. But I'm eager to do it. I've found that I can help look after these women, learn their names, and remember them. I can also sometimes look at them with spiritual eyes and see their essence very quickly, understanding and knowing things about them that I didn't have access to before. I'm grateful for this new way of being with them, this new way of knowing and loving them.

I've counseled with one older sister several times, and I've been astonished to find myself chewing out this woman, telling her bluntly, "You shouldn't do that. That's not a good idea." Every time she sees me she hugs me and says, "You're wonderful. I love you." I'm astonished by this response of hers to my chiding, that love somehow communicates through impatience. I can't solve her problems. That's the heartbreak of being with my sisters. I can't solve any of their problems. But what I can do is tell them I love them and tell them the Lord loves them — that I know what I'm telling them is true and that they should find out for themselves.

In the third area, access to myself, I feel as though I've been on a journey within for the last several years. Yet I feel in many ways as if I'm just beginning now to open my eyes to who I am and what I can do. For a very long time, I lived my life crippled by insecurity and fears of being incompetent. I lived under the shadow of feeling I wasn't smart enough or nice enough to be loved or to be successful.

Part of this feeling stemmed from the wounds I suffered because of my infertility, which for Mormons is like being cursed by God. I had what I felt was a righteous desire for children; and when I learned that I would never bear a child, I felt that I must have done something terribly, terribly wrong, but I couldn't find out what it was, so I could never fix it. I was left feeling that whatever else I did would be unimportant compared to that one, central, important lack. I still live sometimes with those feelings of inadequacy and still

have traces in my life of all the activities I plugged in to fill the gap of not being able to bear a child — including adopting two children. Trying to write a dissertation, I threw out half of the things I do and I still found that things are maniacal at our house. That indicates to me how many things I put in.

I still feel a reluctance to assume the power that's available to me and to act on the knowledge that I have. But the greatest change in me is knowing with a surety that God loves me, just as he loves my sisters. When I pray about them, or for them — asking for news or information — what I feel is a wave of love that is almost physical, almost substantive. And that love includes me.

As I've learned about these sisters, I've also learned about their weaknesses. Inevitably a Relief Society president discovers a lot of painful and sinful areas of people's lives. Getting close to people means getting close to their pain, knowing that they are suffering a great deal — largely because of their own choices, in many cases. But I know that the Lord loves them, even if they don't do what they've promised him — or even if they sign up to can pears and then don't show up. I feel unwaveringly the unqualified love of our Heavenly Parents.

What are the implications for the nature of Relief Society and women in the Church from my experience?

1. It's a slow and complex way to grow; but if you kept changing Relief Society presidents every year, think of the wonderful spiritual growth that would happen, especially if you also gave each woman a great bishop, a supportive husband, wonderful kids, and a job at BYU to keep them off the streets — or on the road.

2. Whether we're in a Relief Society presidency or not, we can ask our Heavenly Parents for information, and we'll get it. There's absolutely no question in my mind about that. I didn't have to be called to this office to receive the revelations and information that I did. I probably wouldn't have received the names of Homemaking counselors if I didn't need Homemaking counselors; but certainly I would have received a great deal more if I had been asking for more.

3. We have an individual responsibility to create change. It's not really fair or productive to carp about a program. Get in and change it. The one thing that really gripes me is how passive the sisters are. I ask, "What kind of a Relief Society do you want? What do you want it to be? What do you want it to do for you? What do you want to do for it?" And then I experience the longest silence in the world.

4. The program is made for us — not us for the program. All over the Church, women should be creating groups that work for them and their sisters, for their spiritual development and for the needs of the ward. What we should find all over the Church is a rich diversity.

My mother is in a Relief Society presidency, and sometimes she really suffers. They keep trying to have Homemaking meeting because it's in the handbook, but almost nobody comes. The presidency has proof positive that their homemaking meetings aren't working, but they don't feel confident enough or free enough to say, "Well, let's try something else." In my ward

right now, we have a book group for work meetings. We have some mini-courses, but we also have a book group because I had to be there and I didn't want to make any more crafts. The bishop thinks it's a great idea and is only sorry he can't join.

I respect, in general, the program as it exists. I don't want to sweep it out; I just want to modify it. I think that the institutional changes toward flexibility have been in exactly the right direction, giving Relief Society presidents an invitation to build an organization that will work for our sisters. I was grateful for the opportunity to create something that would work for the women in my ward.

However, as I try to look at this experience in perspective, it's hard for me to know how significant these concepts and discoveries are for the sisters. I've tried to share my experience with them and myself with them. But I suspect that I'm the chief beneficiary.

Sometimes in Relief Society I feel that I've been called to move my sisters across a river, to a new place, a place only glimpsed from this shore. Some of my sisters don't want to go, and there are days I don't want to go either. Some are going to fall in the river and be lost. I know that, and it hurts me. But the Lord wants me to get out there and move them across.

We have only begun, in the Eleventh Ward of the Salt Lake Central Stake, to build the tiny boats or rafts or ropes — I'm not sure what they are — that will carry us across. I'm not sure how long the journey will be or if I have the strength to actually guide us there. But I know we should swing out, jump in the water, and begin the crossing — that the new land holds the full blossoming of the tiny seeds that are now beginning to grow in our hearts.