

# Ministering to Needs through LDS Social Services

**J. Richard Clarke**

My brothers and sisters, I am sure each of you has been touched by the stories of the Church's great relief efforts to members stricken by floods or earthquakes. Our hearts go out to these people in need. There are, however, other needs—social-emotional needs—that can be just as devastating as any natural disaster. And these needs cannot be met with truckloads of food or clothing. I would like to illustrate several of them in my talk to you today.

Let me begin by reading a letter which relates the tragic story of a young man who became entangled in a way of life which led him to violate the most sacred of God's commandments:

"I know not why I write this letter. Perhaps I grasp at last straws before it's over or whatever. I seek help, without hope of receiving it. Not because I doubt that the Church is true, but because of my sins. Let me say here, *I love my parents* and do what I am able to help them, but my strength is going, and what flicker of spiritual life there is left in me spends itself on writing this letter.

"At a very young age," this young man continues, "I became convinced that my father didn't love me. It stemmed from an encounter when one evening I went to kiss him good night and he brushed me away. I'm sure he doesn't remember, and it had no significance to him, but I was devastated: my entire sense of security and my world crumbled into ashes as I stood there.

"Not knowing what else to do, I ran from this new stranger in a panic to my mother and whispered tones to her of my calamity, which she denied, but did not convince me. That night I watched my father as I stood in the shadows of my darkened bedroom. I swore to myself that I would close the door until he sought to open it. I would ignore him until he sought after me.

"He didn't notice. If he did, he never asked me what was wrong. Well, needless to say, through the next years I went through the motions and rebelled to get his attention, which I got in the form of anger. At any rate, I developed into a homosexual, a vitiating disease, and was soon entrenched in my prison. I didn't know myself. And I have felt for more years than I can remember that the Lord didn't love me either. From age seventeen to about twenty-three I began using drugs. ..."

Well, you can imagine where his life went from there. This young man closes his letter with these words: "Thank you for your time. Can you help me? Is there reason for me to help myself? Can you convince me? Can you spare the time? I've not much left."

Yes, young man, there is help available to you.

We know that the Lord does love this young man, as he loves all of us. This individual has since been referred through the priesthood to an LDS Social Services agency. Hand in hand, his priesthood leader and his LDS Social Services caseworker will help this brother learn what he didn't learn at his father's knee—that the Lord loves him

and that the gospel's plan of repentance and forgiveness is available to all.

In this next situation, Janet, as I will call her, was involved in serious transgression. After discovering that she was expecting a child out of wedlock, her bishop referred her to LDS Social Services. Instead of being condemned by staff personnel as she had feared, she found love and understanding—the love and understanding that she needed to help her repent. With the help of her bishop and the agency, she began to seek the Lord's forgiveness. She was introduced to foster parents who lovingly accepted her into their home. She attended church regularly and studied the gospel. An unwed parents group sponsored by the Church helped her to realize the magnitude of her transgression and to resolve to start a new life. She began to more fully understand herself and her relationship to her Father in heaven.

“I went through an awful lot,” she recalled. “But I felt like such a load was lifted by being able to share the burden with those who understood. I'm so grateful for all the help I received from my Heavenly Father.”

In the final story, Verinda, a vibrant young Apache girl, was accepted into the Indian Student Placement Service. She later gave this testimony:

“When I first participated in this program eight years ago, I got off the bus with only the clothes on my back and a few small possessions in a shoebox. I came from a humble home. My people are humble. But you have opened your hearts unto me. For that I am thankful. Now I can go home with a brand new suitcase of clothes. But that is not my wealth. I am wealthy because that which is inside of me is as precious as all of the wealth in this world. *I have a testimony of the gospel.* I know that Jesus is the Christ and that God lives and answers prayers. I now have a goal—something I can strive for.”

Brothers and sisters, these three stories are in sharp contrast to the world around us. Today, we suffer not only from physical pollution, but from mental pollution as well. Perversions of our basic values are offered as the “new morality.” Cheating and violence are often accepted as a means of achieving individual and group desires. Working mothers and weekend fathers abdicate their parental responsibilities. Husbands and wives separate at the smallest argument. Natural affection is waning. I remember as a bishop an incident of a couple who lost custody of their two young children—one in diapers, the other too young for school. Each day the mother and father went to work and left their children locked in the house to fend for themselves. When questioned by the judge, the mother was quite surprised. She said that they had always left sufficient food for the children to last until suppertime! Can you imagine such an attitude?

This “age of alienation” was foreseen by that great American prophet Moroni. He spoke of our day as “a day when there shall be great pollutions upon the face of the earth; [when] there shall be murders, and robbing, and lying, and deceivings, and whoredoms, and all manner of abominations.” (Morm. 8:31.)

In almost every instance, such tragic conditions in society can be traced back to the failure of men to live the eternal principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These currents in society affect us, too. In many of our stakes there are unwed parents, youth on probation or in detention homes, cases of child abuse or neglect, drug and alcohol problems, serious marital problems, sexual deviancy, and members in mental hospitals and prisons. These problems are staggering, and while we would all prefer that they did not exist, we cannot avoid life as it really is.

As priesthood and Relief Society leaders, we are charged with the responsibility of helping members who suffer from these social and emotional problems. Indeed, the Lord has said that we are to “succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees.” (D&C 81:5.) The Brethren recognize the magnitude of this charge and have provided us with a valuable resource so that we might minister “in the Lord’s own way.” This resource, of course, is our own LDS Social Services division of Welfare Services.

Of their vital work President Harold B. Lee instructed the Regional Representatives in 1970:

“Our social services program has already been a great blessing to our Church members. This program seeks to respond to many problems that beset our members in an affluent society, and it will no doubt increase in its importance, because so many of the problems which this cluster of agencies deals with are symptomatic of our time. Members may need counseling more than clothing, and members who, through bishops, are referred to an agency in our social services program should feel no more hesitancy in asking for help of this kind than we should in requesting help through the priesthood welfare program.” (Seminar for Regional Representatives of the Twelve, Oct. 1, 1970.)

The purpose or mission of LDS Social Services is to assist priesthood leaders by providing quality *licensed* and *clinical* services to members of the Church. This is accomplished by using highly qualified staff members and volunteers whose values, knowledge, and professional skills are in harmony with the gospel and the order of the Church. We should remember that LDS Social Services exists not because anyone doubts that a bishop or quorum doesn’t receive inspiration; rather, it exists because our prophets were inspired to give local priesthood leaders a *resource* to meet social-emotional needs. However, it is important to underscore this caution found on page 25 of the *Welfare Services Handbook*: “The bishop and Melchizedek Priesthood quorum and group leaders are the Lord’s ecclesiastical leaders. They cannot and must not abdicate their responsibility to any agency. Social services agencies are established to be a *resource* to the ecclesiastical leaders. There is no substitute for the inspired counsel and priesthood blessing by the bishop or quorum or group leader.” (*Welfare Services Handbook*, 1974, p. 25; italics added.)

We should also remember that the aim of the Church is to help people to help themselves. To care for people on any other basis, President Romney has said, is to do them more harm than good. A spiritual or emotional dole, Elder Boyd K. Packer has noted, can be just as damaging as a material one.

The *General Handbook of Instructions* indicates that LDS Social Services is the official arm of the Church to handle *licensed services*—which include services to unwed parents, adoptions, foster care, and Indian student placement.

May I emphasize some of our concerns regarding these services. Independent child placements are often illegal and are made without the care and protection exercised by our licensed agencies. Resulting problems have caused untold grief to children involved and their natural parents, as well as to foster and adoptive parents. When Church members and officers in any country are involved in such independent child placements, government officials and others often view these placements as being sanctioned by the Church. As a result, missionary work and other Church programs may be jeopardized. May we encourage all priesthood officers who may be involved in these independent child placements to study the handbook and gauge the propriety of your personal involvement in light of this directive from the First Presidency: “All matters pertaining to the adoption and foster care of children in which the Church is or should be involved have been assigned to LDS Social

Services.”

Licensed, professional adoption services are available to many qualified Latter-day Saint families through LDS Social Services in compliance with all state and federal laws. Families interested in adoption will be made aware of all resources available to them. The goal is to find the right home for a particular child and to ensure the full protection of all parties concerned.

The Unwed Parent Services has been designed to assist single persons in coping with out-of-wedlock pregnancy. This service operates under the direction of the local priesthood leader, except in licensed matters, and includes counseling, foster home placement, educational assistance, medical care, and above all, friendship and understanding. When the natural parents determine that releasing their children for adoption is the best alternative, the agency will ensure that the children are placed in homes of worthy LDS couples. In all instances, services to unwed parents are strictly confidential. Referrals to this program are accepted from any source.

Through the Indian Student Placement Services Program, LDS Social Services, upon referral from the local priesthood leader, assists Indian parents in providing educational, spiritual, cultural, and social experiences for their children from ages eight to eighteen. Children who qualify are placed with carefully screened, active Latter-day Saint foster families for the school year.

Licensed, supervised foster home care provides help and guidance to children who, because of necessity, have been temporarily separated from their parents. This experience, along with spiritual and professional counseling, helps both children and parents prepare for the reuniting of the family.

Clinical services provided by the agency include consultation, evaluation, and treatment of social-emotional problems. At the request of priesthood leaders, professional therapists assist members in exploring causes and solutions to their problems.

Presently there are twenty-one LDS Social Services agencies. In areas where agencies have not been established, priesthood leaders may evaluate the need for this service. Additional agencies will be established when sufficient need has been identified and when regional and area welfare leaders so determine.

When a new agency is established, a small core of professionals is employed. Trained volunteers are added to this basic group of people. Stake presidents work with agencies to the fullest extent possible in identifying and inviting volunteers to serve.

In areas where LDS Social Services agencies are not established, priesthood leaders should maintain a listing of LDS and non-LDS resources that provide similar services. Individuals and agencies being considered should be screened to ensure that their values are compatible with Church standards and values. Local laws should always be observed when adoption, unwed parent, or foster care services are used.

It should go without saying that many of these problems would be alleviated if parents would spend more time teaching and rearing their children. Related to the story that I gave at the beginning of my talk is evidence of a clinical researcher who, after studying 850 individual cases, stated: “Homosexuality would not occur where there is a normal, loving father-and-son relationship.” Any of our people living in righteousness would normally avoid being involved in these problems.

Each of the stories I have told illustrates, I believe, the value of LDS Social Services when directed by the

priesthood. In 1973, President Lee said: “The greatest miracles I see today are not necessarily the healing of sick bodies, but the ... healing of sick souls, those who are sick in soul and spirit and are downhearted and distraught, on the verge of nervous breakdowns. We are reaching out to all such, because they are precious in the sight of the Lord, and we want no one to feel that they are forgotten.” (*Ensign*, July 1973, p. 123.)

They are not forgotten. Think of the young man who was estranged from his father, the seventeen-year-old girl expecting a baby, the bright-eyed Indian student—these are not statistics, brothers and sisters; these are real people with real needs.

As priesthood and Relief Society leaders, we are charged to reach out to these people. But we have been given help. Just as a physician may attend to physical illness, so may LDS Social Services assist in meeting social-emotional needs under the spiritual direction of the priesthood leader.

As we contemplate how we can use this resource, think of the young boy staring out of his darkened bedroom at his father. How many more are there like him? How can we walk down the hallway and open the door? I pray that we priesthood leaders may magnify our callings and let the Spirit guide us in using this resource of LDS Social Services, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.