

“She Stretcheth Out Her Hand to the Poor”

Barbara B. Smith

In Proverbs we read of a woman who is the embodiment of the ideal wife, mother, provident homemaker, and compassionate woman. The essence of my message is contained in one of the passages which describes her:

“She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.” (Prov. 31:20.)

A fundamental doctrine of the gospel, a basic value in Welfare Services, and a response that has become traditional for both Welfare Services and Relief Society is the principle of *service*.

The women of the Church are no strangers to service; for Relief Society was born amid hardship, persecution and sacrifice in a time that called forth the greatest compassion, succor, and service women could give.

From those days in Nauvoo to the present, the records are filled with the activities of women as they have brought relief to the distressed, aid to the poor and needy, ministrations to the sick, and comfort to those that mourn.

Service of Latter-day Saint women continues to be in demand now as never before, both in the welfare program of our rapidly growing Church and in a society filled with problems which increasingly compound. The welfare work of the Church is based upon voluntary service, a great amount of which must be performed by women.

Women’s first responsibility for service is to their families, for this is the fundamental priority established by the Lord. It must be their first consideration, and that of all those who call them to positions or seek their assistance in any endeavor; for the building of strong families is fundamental to a strong society.

Service in the Church most often should be a woman’s next priority, with service in the community being a third consideration.

Ranking first in the realm of Church service is the official calling, which is the formal request made by one having the proper priesthood authority after prayerfully taking into account family situations and other personal circumstances. The call is to a particular position, such as an officer, teacher, visiting teacher, or missionary. It would be expected that this service would continue for some time.

Besides the official calling there is an official assignment, which covers a whole gamut of service opportunities in the Church.

Before giving an official assignment, a priesthood or Relief Society leader should take into consideration family responsibilities and Church callings. An official request might be made by a ward Relief Society president to an individual woman for compassionate service to meet a specific need of another person.

I recently heard of a ward in which there were seventy sisters over seventy years of age. Their wise Relief Society president felt that even those who were homebound could serve, and so she gave each of the seventy sisters either a visiting teaching assignment or a compassionate service assignment. Even a sister stricken with a terminal disease was assigned to write a monthly letter to each of three sisters who were homebound. Some

sisters were assigned to call other sisters each day to make sure they were all right.

One sister continued to serve as a visiting teacher supervisor when she was ill and homebound. Her Relief Society president reported that, with much effort, this sister put on one of her prettiest dresses before doing the telephoning each month, feeling that this act gave her service importance and dignity as she filled this assignment for the Lord.

Within the official assignment category would be service on a Deseret Industries committee, or as a Home Craft Committee chairman, or service in a welfare canning project. Included would also be service to LDS Social Services, where a woman might be assigned to aid a case worker, provide a foster home, or assist with the Indian Student Placement Program.

A woman may consider that she has been given an official assignment in Relief Society when she is asked to serve as chairman of the Relief Society Homemaking Day luncheon, to sew a welfare clothing item, or to assist at the time of illness or death. These assignments are for specific tasks, but they do not appoint one to a continuing position in the Church. Official assignments would usually be for a shorter duration than a calling, and might be a one-time task or duty.

Another area of service within the general context of Church service is that of individual compassionate service on a spontaneous, personal basis. It is the kind of watchful care that each woman is expected to give to a neighbor in need.

In the Welfare Meeting of 1975 and in the Welfare Services Handbook, we suggested that wards keep a current resource file indicating the talents and the abilities of the sisters as well as their needs and wants. Those records should include the areas of expertise and availability of sisters for service. (Welfare Services Meeting, April 5, 1975, p. 13).

The stake Relief Society president can help the ward presidents in many ways to encourage the sisters to serve:

1. By making use of the files
 1. A. In giving Relief Society service assignments to women;
 2. B. In recommending homemaking minicourses or special training in managerial or organizational skills so that women will have more time for service; and
 3. C. In recommending sisters to community service projects;
2. By helping women who desire to serve to evaluate their circumstances, commitments, time, and physical strength (married women might like to do this in consultation with their husbands); and
3. By encouraging women to enlist the cooperation of family members and others in order to make service easier.

A third broad category of service for those who have the time, ability, and energy beyond that needed for family and Church responsibilities is voluntary community service. Voluntary community service should be freely given within an area of a particular interest or expertise, when circumstances permit.

Within this classification lie limitless possibilities of service for women in worthy community causes, civic betterment efforts or in innumerable ways as concerned citizens.

The Prophet Joseph Smith seemed particularly insightful, not only concerning his day and times, but ours as well, when he admonished women in the founding period of the Relief Society “to assist by correcting the morals and strengthening the virtues of the community.” (Minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, March 17, 1842, p. 7.)

There is a reservoir of talented women who are not overburdened with family obligations or with Church callings who can give of their time to rewarding voluntary service—service that can be the means of improving society, or lifting the level of community morality—and at the same time underscore the welfare principle of service. This is their opportunity to broaden their scope of service—not only to their “own,” but to their non-Church neighbors as well.

Through the scriptures we are admonished by the Lord to be “anxiously engaged in a good cause.” (D&C 58:27.) Almost every woman can find appropriate ways of serving in good causes. A mother with a family of school-age children may feel the best way to serve her community is by becoming involved in the improvement of the schools her children attend or by making her family aware of good causes in the community and appropriate ways in which they can become involved, such as in the president’s National Family Week.

Only when a woman understands the importance and the enrichment of service and evaluates her opportunities—neither making excuses to avoid service nor overextending herself unwisely—can she enjoy the promised blessings of service as she follows the example of the “virtuous woman,” as “she stretcheth out her hand to the poor, yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.”

It is my prayer that women may, with discernment, minister to the poor and needy—even to the poor in spirit—and serve them well, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.