

## Elder Dallin H. Oaks

### Relief Society sesquicentennial

This year we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Relief Society, organized in Nauvoo, Illinois, on March 17, 1842. Last month's anniversary program was carried by satellite to most continents of the world. Books are being published to review the history and celebrate the worldwide sisterhood of Relief Society. Ward and stake Relief Societies are celebrating through service in their local communities. Far-reaching efforts to promote literacy will be formally announced later this year.

We are grateful for the effective leadership of President Elaine L. Jack and her counselors and board, who are directing this celebration, and for the earlier leaders and workers whose accomplishments we celebrate.

The Relief Society has great significance for every member of the Church. All of us have been blessed through the example and service of its members.

I am the beneficiary of at least four different generations of Relief Society service: my grandmother, my mother, my wife, and our daughters.

The most vivid memories of my childhood include my grandmother all dressed up to leave the farm and drive into town, resolute and cheerful in her Relief Society service. My mother's leadership in the Relief Society of one of the BYU stakes was influential in the lives of hundreds of young women being prepared for a lifetime of service in family, church, and community. I have met these women in many of my visits throughout the Church.

In Chicago, our children and I were schooled in Christian love and service by a mother and wife working in her calling as ward Relief Society president. Later, at BYU, we rejoiced as our daughters were called to leader-

ship and service in the Relief Societies of their BYU branches. The entire family enjoys benefits and blessings through Relief Society service.

### Charitable work

From its beginning, the Relief Society has led out in charitable work. At the first meeting, President Emma Smith said, "Each member should be ambitious to do good" (minutes of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 17 Mar. 1842, p. 13; see also "Ambitious to Do Good," *Ensign*, Mar. 1992, p. 4; quotations are taken from original documents, hereafter referred to as minutes). The minutes of those initial meetings are filled with accounts of how the sisters obtained work opportunities for the needy, took in the homeless, and made donations to help those in need of food, shelter, and schooling.

A decade after the departure from Nauvoo, sisters trained in the principles of the Relief Society were still leading in efforts to provide for those in need. In a session of conference, President Brigham Young announced that the Saints in two handcart companies were stranded by early snows and suffering in the mountains of Wyoming. He called for immediate help to rescue them, and before they left the Tabernacle many sisters had begun to gather clothing to send to the Saints in the mountains (see Kenneth W. Godfrey et al., *Women's Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830-1900* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1982], p. 269).

### The commission to save souls

In the initial meetings of Relief Society, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught that the society "is not only to relieve the poor, but to save souls" (minutes, 9 June 1842, p. 63; *History of*

the Church, 5:25). A later First Presidency explained: "One of the purposes of the organization of the Relief Society was that a system might be inaugurated by which study of religious subjects, or Church doctrine and government, might be pursued by women. The administration of charity under the direction of the Bishopric . . . was to be part of their active work. But this was not intended to absorb their activities to the exclusion of the development of faith, and the advancement of women in literary, social and domestic activities of life" (in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965-75], 5:217).

"To save souls opens the whole field of human activity and development," Elder John A. Widtsoe later declared. "Relief of poverty, relief of illness; relief of doubt, relief of ignorance—relief of all that hinders the joy and progress of woman. What a magnificent commission!" (John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], p. 308).

### Teaching the gospel

That commission included teaching. In a revelation given in 1830, the Lord told Emma Smith that the Prophet would authorize her "to expound scriptures, and to exhort the church, according as it shall be given thee by my Spirit" (D&C 25:7). When she was later selected to lead the Relief Society, her prophet husband referred to this revelation that she would "expound the scriptures to all" and "teach the female part of the community." He declared "that not she alone, but others, may attain to the same blessings" (minutes, 17 Mar. 1842, p. 8).

Succeeding Presidents of the Church have reemphasized this impor-

tant duty to teach, and the leaders and teachers of the Relief Society have fulfilled this responsibility with great distinction.

### Organization of the Relief Society

The Relief Society was organized upon the initiative of the women of Nauvoo. Desiring to organize a society to promote sisterhood and to accomplish benevolent works, a group of women asked Eliza R. Snow to draft a constitution and bylaws. When Joseph Smith learned of this, he asked that the sisters be called together so that he could provide "something better for them than a written Constitution." One sister recalled his saying, "I will organize the women under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood" (Sarah M. Kimball, "Auto-Biography," *Woman's Exponent*, 1 Sept. 1883, p. 51).

We are fortunate to have careful minutes of the first two years' meetings of the Relief Society. From these minutes we know the substance of the Prophet Joseph Smith's instructions to the new organization and its members. This anniversary is an appropriate time to recall and reemphasize these prophetic directions.

In his first formal instruction to the newly founded organization, the Prophet said he was "deeply interested that [the Relief Society] might be built up to the Most High in an acceptable manner." He taught that "when instructed, we must obey that voice . . . that the blessings of heaven may rest down upon us. All must act in concert, or nothing can be done [that the Society] should move according to the ancient Priesthood" (minutes, 30 Mar. 1842, p. 22; *History of the Church*, 4:570).

The Prophet's counsel apparently sought to give this new organization the benefit of an early revelation in which the Lord instructed the newly

organized First Presidency “how you may act before me, that it may turn to you for your salvation. I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise” (D&C 82:9–10). The Relief Society’s promised blessings were dependent upon its leaders and members functioning within the limits the Lord had set.

### Directed by the priesthood

The next time he met with the Relief Society, Joseph Smith “exhorted the sisters always to concentrate their faith and prayers for, and place confidence in those whom God has appointed to honor, whom God has placed at the head to lead” (minutes, 28 Apr. 1842, p. 37; *History of the Church*, 4:604–5). This counsel, of course, furthered the direction in the earlier revelation on priesthood, which declared that all “authorities or offices in the church are appendages” to the Melchizedek Priesthood and that this priesthood “holds the right of presidency, and has power and authority over all the offices in the church in all ages of the world” (D&C 107:5, 8). Consequently, the Relief Society and the auxiliaries organized later have always functioned and have thrived under the direction of the presiding authorities of the priesthood.

At this same meeting, the Prophet spoke the words that President Gordon B. Hinckley recently characterized as “a charter . . . of the Relief Society of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (“Ambitious to Do Good,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1992, p. 4):

“This Society is to get instruction thro’ the order which God has established—thro’ the medium of those appointed to lead” (minutes, 28 Apr. 1842).

Here the Prophet declared that the Relief Society was to receive instruction and direction from the priest-

hood leaders who presided over their activities. Like the quorums of priesthood holders in the Church, the Relief Society was to be self-governing, but it was not to be an independent organization. It was an integral part of the Church, not a separate church for women.

The Prophet continued, “I now turn the key to you in the name of God and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time—this is the beginning of better days to this Society” (minutes, 28 Apr. 1842, p. 40).

When he “turn[ed] the key,” the Prophet Joseph Smith made the Relief Society an official part of the Church and kingdom of God. This opened to women new opportunities for receiving knowledge and intelligence from on high, such as through the temple ordinances that were soon to be instituted. Similarly, as the Prophet promised them in connection with their charitable service, “If you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates” (minutes, 28 Apr. 1842, p. 38; *History of the Church*, 4:605).

### Authority and priesthood keys

President Joseph Fielding Smith taught that the Prophet’s action opened to women the possibility of exercising “some measure of divine authority, particularly in the direction of government and instruction in behalf of the women of the Church” (“Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1965, p. 5). President Smith explained: “While the sisters have not been given the Priesthood, . . . that does not mean that the Lord has not given unto them authority. Authority and Priesthood are two different things. A person may have authority given to him, or a sister to her, to do certain things in the Church that are binding and absolutely neces-

sary for our salvation, such as the work that our sisters do in the House of the Lord" ("The Relief Society Organized by Revelation," *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1959, p. 4).

President Smith's teaching on authority explains what the Prophet Joseph Smith meant when he said that he organized the Relief Society "under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood." The authority to be exercised by the officers and teachers of the Relief Society, as with the other auxiliary organizations, was the authority that would flow to them through their organizational connection with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and through their individual setting apart under the hands of the priesthood leaders by whom they were called.

No priesthood keys were delivered to the Relief Society. Keys are conferred on individuals, not organizations. The same is true of priesthood authority and of the related authority exercised under priesthood direction. Organizations may channel the exercise of such authority, but they do not embody it. Thus, the priesthood keys were delivered to the members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, not to any organizations (see Topical Guide, "Priesthood, Keys of").

Under the priesthood authority of the bishop, the president of a ward Relief Society presides over and directs the activities of the Relief Society in the ward. A stake Relief Society president presides and exercises authority over the function to which she has been called. The same is true for the other auxiliaries. Similarly, women called as missionaries are set apart to go forth with authority to teach the everlasting gospel, and women called to work in a temple are given authority for the sacred functions to which they have been called. All function under the direction of the priesthood leader who has been

given the priesthood keys to direct those who labor in his area of responsibility.

The Prophet Joseph Smith told the early sisters that he had something better for them than a written constitution. Being organized under priesthood authority, they were to reject worldly concepts of power and seek the power that flows down from heaven for those functions and to those individuals who are using their time and talents in the Lord's way.

In considering the Prophet's instructions to the first Relief Society, we should remember that in those earliest days in Church history more revelation was to come. Thus, when he spoke to the sisters about the appropriateness of their laying on hands to bless one another, the Prophet cautioned "that the time had not been before that these things could be in their proper order—that the Church is not now organized in its proper order, and cannot be until the Temple is completed" (minutes, 28 Apr. 1842, p. 36). During the century that followed, as temples became accessible to most members, "proper order" required that these and other sacred practices be confined within those temples.

### Importance of motherhood

I will conclude by offering some counsel on the responsibilities of fathers and mothers and priesthood leaders, with special emphasis on matters of interest to the Relief Society.

President Harold B. Lee repeatedly told men that "the greatest of the Lord's work you . . . will ever do . . . will be within the walls of your own home" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1973, p. 130; or *Ensign*, July 1973, p. 98). That direction also applies to women, and it should engage the best teaching efforts of the Relief Society. We cannot overstate the supreme importance of the task our Father in

Heaven has assigned to the mothers, who are the teachers and workers and standard-setters in the homes of the Latter-day Saints. The mothers in those homes give the impressionable sons and daughters of God their earliest and most formative orientation for their mortal journey toward eternal life.

### Using the priesthood to bless others

Brethren, we know that the priesthood is the power of God delegated to men to act for the blessing and salvation of all mankind. While we sometimes refer to priesthood holders as "the priesthood," we must never forget that the priesthood is not owned by or embodied in those who hold it. It is held in a sacred trust to be used for the benefit of men, women, and children alike. Elder John A. Widtsoe said, "Men have no greater claim than women upon the blessings that issue from the Priesthood and accompany its possession" (*Priesthood and Church Government* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1938], p. 83). For example, our young women should have just as many opportunities for blessings from priesthood leaders as our young men.

### Unity of priesthood and auxiliaries

Some leaders at various levels of the Church have neglected to apply these basic principles. Some have failed to have the regular consultation with auxiliary leaders that is specified in our Church handbooks of instruction. President Spencer W. Kimball taught the governing principle to the priesthood leaders of the Church when he said: "Our sisters do not wish to be indulged or to be treated condescendingly; they desire to be respected and revered as our sisters and our equals. I mention all these things, my brethren, not because the doctrines or the teachings of the Church regarding women are in any doubt, but because in some

situations our behavior is of doubtful quality" (in Conference Report, Oct. 1979, p. 72; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, p. 49).

Priesthood leaders are directed to work in close harmony and partnership with the leaders of our auxiliaries: "As auxiliary leaders work with priesthood leaders to accomplish the mission of the Church, the Lord's earthly kingdom will prosper and individual lives will be blessed" (*Melchizedek Priesthood Leadership Handbook* [1990], p. 2).

Only by unity can we follow the way of the Lord, who said, "Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine" (D&C 38:27).

### Marriage: a common objective

One of the great functions of Relief Society is to provide sisterhood for women, just as priesthood quorums provide brotherhood for men. But all should remember that neither sisterhood nor brotherhood is an end in itself. Each is a means of individual spiritual growth and cooperative service. The ultimate and highest expression of womanhood and manhood is in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. Only this relationship culminates in exaltation. As the Apostle Paul taught, "Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:11). Thus, the common objective of brotherhood in our priesthood quorums and sisterhood in our Relief Societies is to bring men and women together in the sacred marriage and family relationships that lead toward eternal life, "the greatest of all the gifts of God" (D&C 14:7).

We give thanks for the Savior, who made this great goal attainable, for His priesthood authority that administers the essential ordinances, and for the great men and women whose lives are an inspiring legacy of godly service. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.