

Bishops—Shepherds over the Lord’s Flock

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My dear brethren of the priesthood, one of the most memorable lines in a much-loved hymn asks, “Shall the youth of Zion falter?”¹ My heartfelt and resounding declaration in answer to that question is “No!”

To make sure that answer holds true, I testify today that supporting the rising generation in a time of unusual challenges and temptations is an essential responsibility given to parents and bishoprics by Heavenly Father.² Let me illustrate the importance of a bishopric with a personal experience.

When I was a deacon, my family moved to a new home in a different ward. I was beginning junior high school, so I also attended a new school. There was a marvelous group of young men in the deacons quorum. Most of their parents were active members. My mother was completely active; my father was exceptional in every way but was not an active member.

The second counselor in the bishopric,³ Brother Dean Eyre, was a devoted leader. When I was still adjusting to the new ward, a father-son event was announced for Bear Lake—about 40 miles (65 km) away. I did not think I would attend without my father. But Brother Eyre issued a special invitation for me to go with him. He spoke highly and respectfully of my father and stressed the significance of my opportunity to be with the other members of the deacons quorum. So I decided to go with Brother Eyre, and I had a wonderful experience.

Brother Eyre was a marvelous example of Christlike love in fulfilling the bishopric’s responsibility to support parents in watching over and nurturing the youth. He gave me an excellent start in this new ward and was a mentor to me.

A few months before I left for a mission in 1960, Brother Eyre passed away from cancer at age 39. He left a wife and their five children, all younger than age 16. His oldest sons, Richard and Chris Eyre, have assured me that in the absence of their father, bishoprics supported and watched out for them and their younger brothers and sister with Christlike love, for which I am grateful.

Parents will always have the main responsibility for their families.⁴ Quorum presidencies also provide essential support and guidance to quorum members by

assisting them in elevating the duties and power of the Aaronic Priesthood to the center of their lives.⁵

Today my purpose is to focus on bishops and their counselors, who can appropriately be called “shepherds over the Lord’s flock”—with emphasis on being shepherds for the rising generation.⁶ It is interesting that the Apostle Peter referred to Jesus Christ as “the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”⁷

The bishop has five principal responsibilities in presiding over a ward:

1. He is the presiding high priest in the ward.⁸
2. He is president of the Aaronic Priesthood.⁹
3. He is a common judge.¹⁰
4. He coordinates the work of salvation and exaltation, including caring for those in need.¹¹
5. And he oversees records, finances, and the use of the meetinghouse.¹²

In his role as presiding high priest, the bishop is the ward’s “spiritual leader.”¹³ He is a “faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴

In addition, “the bishop coordinates the work of salvation and exaltation in the ward.”¹⁵ The bishop should assign the day-to-day responsibility for sharing the gospel, strengthening new and returning members, ministering, and temple and family history work to the elders quorum and Relief Society presidencies.¹⁶ The bishop coordinates this work in the ward council and ward youth council.

The bishop has a paramount role in serving as a shepherd to guide the rising generation, including young single adults, to Jesus Christ.¹⁷ President Russell M. Nelson has emphasized the seminal role of the bishop and his counselors. He has taught that their “first and foremost responsibility is to care for the young men and young women of [their] ward.”¹⁸ The bishopric supports parents in watching over and nurturing children and youth in the ward. The bishop and ward Young Women president counsel together. They strive to help the youth live the standards in *For the Strength of Youth*, qualify to receive ordinances, and make and keep sacred covenants.

You might ask, “Why is the bishop directed to spend so much time with the youth?” The Lord has organized His Church to accomplish crucial priorities. Accordingly, the organization of His Church has a structure in which the bishop has a dual responsibility. He has doctrinal responsibility for the ward as a whole, but he also has specific doctrinal responsibility for the priests quorum.¹⁹

The young men who are priests and the young women of the same age are at a very important stage in their lives and development. During a short period of time, they make decisions that have significant lifelong implications. They determine whether they will qualify for the temple, serve a mission,²⁰ strive to be married in the temple, and prepare for their life’s work. These decisions, once made, have

profound spiritual and practical implications for the remainder of their lives. Bishops, please know that a relatively short time spent with a young priest, young woman, or young adult can help them understand the power available to them through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. It can provide a vision that will have a profound influence upon their entire life.

One of the best examples I have seen of a bishop who helped provide this kind of vision for his youth was Bishop Moa Mahe. He was called to be the first bishop of the San Francisco Tongan Ward.²¹ He was an immigrant from Vava'u, Tonga. His ward was located near the San Francisco, California, airport, where he worked.²²

The ward had a large number of youth, most from families who had recently immigrated to the United States. Bishop Mahe not only taught them in word and by example how to be righteous disciples of Jesus Christ, but he also helped give them a vision of what they could become and helped them prepare for the temple, missions, education, and employment. He served for almost eight years, and his dreams and desires for the youth became a reality.

Nearly 90 percent of the young men in the Aaronic Priesthood quorums served missions. Fifteen young men and women were the first members of their families to attend college.²³ He met with the principal of the local high school (not of our faith), and they forged a friendship and collaborated on how to assist each young person to achieve worthwhile goals and overcome problems. The principal told me that Bishop Mahe assisted him in working with immigrants of all faiths who were struggling. The young people knew that the bishop loved them.

Sadly, Bishop Mahe passed away while serving as bishop. I will never forget his touching and inspiring funeral. There was a huge crowd. The choir was composed of more than 35 faithful young members who had served missions or were attending college and who had been youth during his service as bishop. One speaker expressed the intense feeling of appreciation from the youth and young adults in his ward. He paid tribute to Bishop Mahe for the vision he had given them in preparing for life and righteous service. But most important, Bishop Mahe had assisted them in building faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as the foundation of their lives.

Now, bishops, wherever you serve, in your interviews and other associations, you can provide that kind of vision and build faith in Jesus Christ. You can extend powerful invitations to change behavior, prepare them for life, and inspire them to stay on the covenant path.

In addition, you may help some youth who are in conflict with parents over things that are relatively unimportant.²⁴ At a time when young people seem to have maximum conflict with their parents, the person who presides over their quorum and to whom they answer ecclesiastically is also the person to whom their parents go for temple recommends. This puts the bishop in a unique position to counsel both the youth and their parents when contention has created a division. Bishops can help both view things with an eternal perspective and resolve issues of more or less importance. We recommend that bishops not have assigned ministering

families so they can focus their time and energy ministering to the youth and their families in these kinds of situations.²⁵

I am aware of one bishop who was able to resolve extreme contention between a son and his parents, bringing harmony to the home and enhanced commitment to the gospel. The bishop helped the parents understand that striving to be a disciple of Jesus Christ was more important than exactly how and when family chores were accomplished.

In order to spend more time with youth, wherever they are, including at school events or activities, bishoprics have been counseled to delegate appropriate meetings and counseling time with adults. While bishops can counsel on acute and urgent matters, we recommend that delegation of ongoing counseling with chronic, less urgent matters that do not involve judgments as to worthiness be assigned to members of the elders quorum or Relief Society—usually presidencies or ministering brothers and sisters. The Spirit will guide the leaders²⁶ to select the right members to undertake this counseling. Those who receive this delegated counseling assignment are entitled to revelation. They, of course, must always maintain strict confidentiality.

Thoughtful leaders have always sacrificed for the rising generation. This is where the bishopric members spend the majority of their Church-service time.

I now desire to say a few things directly to the youth and then to our bishops.

Many of you precious young people may not have a clear vision of who you are and who you can become. Yet you are at the threshold of the most important decisions you will make in your lives. Please counsel with both your parents and your bishop about important choices that are ahead of you. Allow the bishop to be your friend and counselor.

We are aware that you have trials and temptations coming at you from every direction. We all need to repent daily, as President Nelson has taught. Please talk to your bishop about any matter in which a common judge can assist you in getting your life in order with the Lord in preparation for the “great work” He has for you in this final dispensation.²⁷ As President Nelson has invited you, please qualify yourself to be part of the Lord’s youth battalion!²⁸

Now a word for you precious bishops on behalf of the leadership and members of the Church. We express our deep gratitude to you. With the adjustments that you have been requested to make in recent years, dear bishops, please know how much we love and appreciate you. Your contribution to the kingdom is almost beyond description. The Church has 30,900 bishops and branch presidents serving across the world.²⁹ We honor each of you.

Some words and the sacred callings they describe are imbued with almost a spiritual, transcendent significance. The calling of *bishop* is definitely in the top tier of such words. To serve the Lord in this capacity is remarkable in so many ways. The calling, sustaining, and setting apart of a bishop is a never-to-be-forgotten experience. For me, it ranks with a small number of sublime events in the wide

range and depth of feelings it evokes. It sits comfortably in a hierarchy of precious events like marriage and fatherhood that cannot be described in a few words.³⁰

Bishops, we sustain you! Bishops, we love you! You are truly the Lord's shepherds over His flock. The Savior will not forsake you in these sacred callings. Of this I testify, on this Easter weekend, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.