

Training Emphasizes Importance of Councils

By Adam C. Olson

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During the November 2010 worldwide leadership training meeting, in which the Church's new handbooks were introduced, Church leaders emphasized the importance of effective ward¹ councils in supporting overburdened bishops and in carrying out the work of salvation.

"*Handbook 2* seeks to reduce the workload of the bishop by enhancing the role of the ward council and its members," said Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. This includes assisting the bishop "on matters of importance to the whole ward" and "helping in the rescue role of activation and retention."

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Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

The Importance of Councils

During the November training, Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles explained that "the Church is governed through councils at the general, area, stake, and ward levels" and that "the new handbooks significantly

enhance the role of councils in the Church."

Elder Cook discussed three fundamental councils at the ward level essential for the bishop to conduct the affairs of the Church and how these councils are affected by the new handbooks. These include the bishopric, the priesthood executive committee, and the ward council.

The bishopric will function mostly as it has in the past. While the PEC will continue to meet regularly and will handle some of the items previously handled by the ward welfare committee, Elder Cook suggested that PEC meetings will probably decrease in length because of a likely increase in the meeting frequency of the ward council.

The new handbook "elevates the role of the ward council in administering the ward under the keys of the bishop," said Elder Cook.

Elevating the Ward Council

The handbooks elevate the ward council by suggesting what the bishop can delegate and expanding the roles of council members to assist him.

"The primary effort of the ward council is the work of salvation in the ward," Elder Cook said. "Many issues now come directly to the bishop. Hopefully this will change as bishops delegate more matters in ward council meetings and/or privately to individuals, including such items as welfare, retention, activation" and so forth.

Elder Cook explained that while the bishop will continue to handle "problems that require a common judge in Israel," he can, with the consent of the member seeking repentance, delegate to others "the extensive counseling that may be necessary" to assist members recovering from addictions or who need help with financial issues, family matters, or other problems.

"Members of the ward council do most of their



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work outside of ward council meetings,” Elder Cook said. “They work with their counselors and with home teachers, visiting teachers, and others in reaching out and ministering to those . . . who need assistance.”

He urged priesthood and auxiliary leaders to identify and resolve concerns that can be appropriately handled within the quorum or organization to alleviate the burden on the bishop and ward council.

Every Member Counts

During the broadcast, the importance of contributions from every member on the council was emphasized by a panel consisting of Elder M. Russell Ballard, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, and Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles; Elder Walter F. González of the Presidency of the Seventy; and Julie B. Beck, Relief Society general president.

“I think we have the mistaken notion that every element of revelation coming to the ward has to come through the bishop,” said Elder Bednar. “By virtue of his keys, he has to acknowledge it and affirm it, but he doesn’t necessarily have to be the only vehicle through whom it comes.”

Elder Bednar emphasized the importance of unity once the presiding authority has made a decision in order for the council to operate under the influence of the Holy Ghost.

A second worldwide leadership training meeting will be held on February 12, 2011, to focus on the responsibilities of stake presidents and bishops, the work of quorums and auxiliaries, and the special challenges of units that lack sufficient members and leaders to carry out the full programs of the Church.

EFFECTIVE WARD COUNCILS

The following is specific counsel for running effective councils given during the worldwide leadership training meeting.

Effective councils:

- Spend minimal time during meetings on calendaring, activity planning, and other administrative business.
- Focus on matters that will strengthen individuals and families.
- Invite full expression from all council members, who then unite behind the bishop’s decision.
- Unify organizational efforts to respond to individual, family, and organizational needs.
- Meet regularly, more often than under the previous handbooks, but typically no longer than 60 to 90 minutes.
- Protect confidentiality.

Elder Holland warned against a cultural disregard for the value of women in councils. “We sometimes have not been as inviting or as encouraging . . . to the women sitting in the council as we should be,” he said. “We’ve got to have the help of the women.”

The panel emphasized that wise leaders listen.

“The gift of discernment operates more effectively when we’re listening as opposed to when we’re talking,” said Elder Bednar.

Elder Ballard added that the principle of listening applies to every member of the council and that no one member should dominate the conversation.

“When [the] Spirit operates within the council system of the Church, the work will go forward, and we will rescue many more of our Father’s children,” Elder Ballard said. “It’s one grand work that we all put our shoulder to.” ■

NOTE

1. The terms *ward*, *bishop*, and *bishopric* also apply to *branch*, *branch president*, and *branch presidency*. The terms *stake*, *stake president*, and *stake presidency* also apply to *district*, *district president*, and *district presidency*.