

OBTAINING the Spirit THROUGH Counseling TOGETHER

*Five principles
General Authorities
use to invite the Spirit
into their councils.*

By R. Val Johnson

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As members of the Church, we can experience the guidance of the Holy Ghost in our personal lives. Whether we are struggling with a family challenge, a problem at work, or a Church assignment, we can receive divine direction if we will ask, seek, and knock (see Matthew 7:7; D&C 88:63). The Church magazines and manuals are filled with stories of members and leaders who have sought revelation and received it.

These stories usually reflect a solitary effort involving individual study, prayer, fasting on occasion, sincere repentance if necessary, and moving forward in faith. But we can obtain direction from our Heavenly Father in another way, and it can be quite powerful. This is the revelatory process of counseling with others.

The principles that guide a person to receive individual revelation are much the same as those that influence members of a group, but other principles are involved as well. Because members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles regularly counsel together to arrive at decisions, their experiences illustrate these principles in action.

Principle 1: Pray, Ponder, and Counsel Together

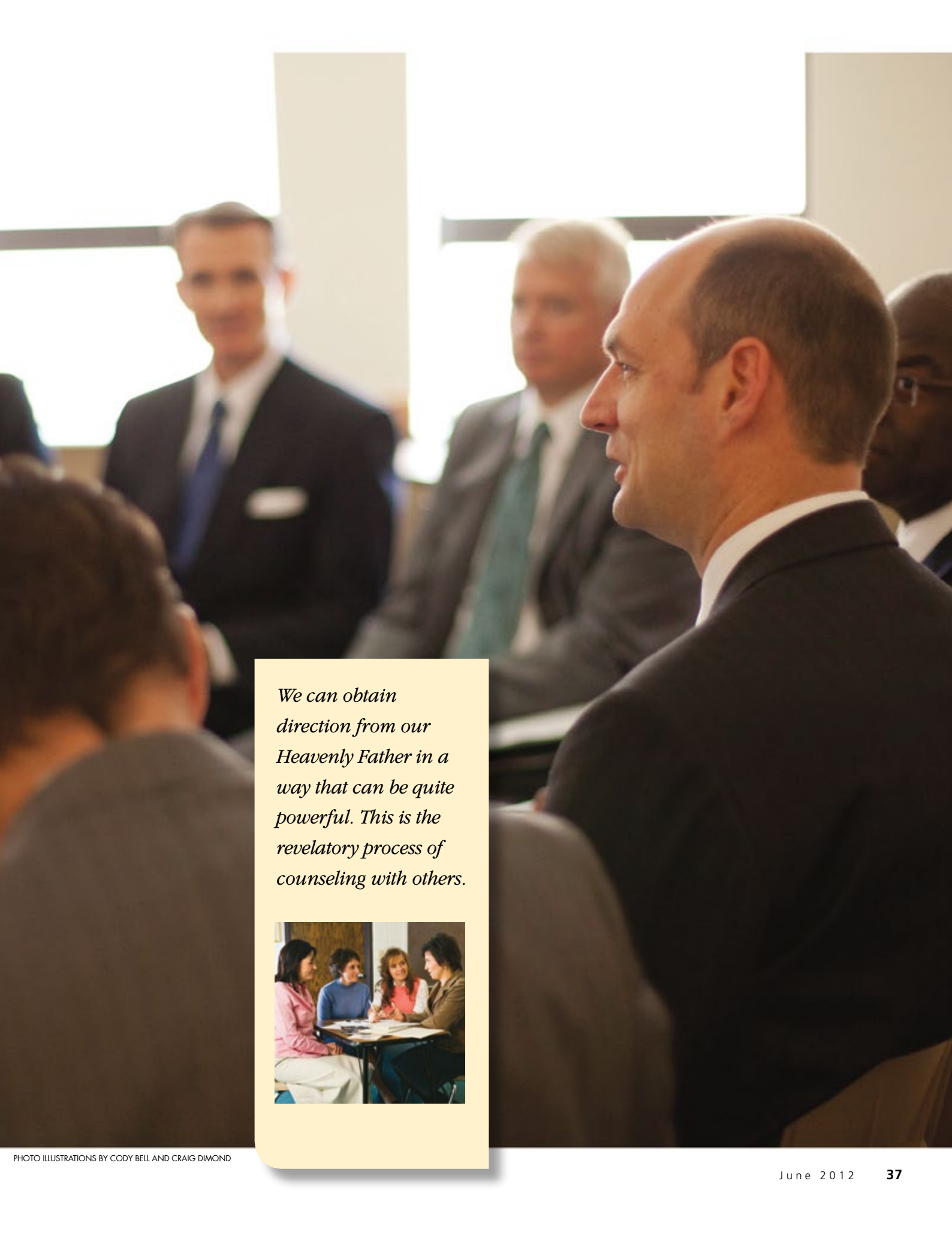
Before being called to the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder Robert D. Hales learned from President Boyd K. Packer the first vital step in obtaining the Spirit when seeking inspiration with another: praying, pondering, and counseling together. He related:

“We were assigned to reorganize a stake and began by kneeling in prayer together. After interviewing priesthood leaders and having prayer, Elder Packer suggested that we walk around the building together. As we walked, he demonstrated a vital principle of seeking . . . revelation—the principle the Lord taught Oliver Cowdery: ‘Behold, . . . you must study it out in your mind’ (D&C 9:8). We pondered our assignment, counseled together, and listened to the voice of the Spirit. When we went back, we prayed and studied further, and then we were prepared to receive revelation.”¹

Principle 2: Seek Unity

The next principle is to seek unity in making the decision. Such unity is difficult





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to achieve without the Spirit. Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve related an experience common in meetings of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. He said that a proposal was brought to a meeting, and the president of the quorum at the time, President Howard W. Hunter (1907–1995), said, “This is so critically important [that] I would like to hear the feeling of each member of the Twelve independently about this proposal.”

Elder Scott remembered, “We were going around the circle giving our feelings: ‘I think that’s all right; seems all right to me.’ [Then] it came to one of the members of the Twelve, and . . . he said, ‘I don’t know why; I can’t put my finger on any specific thing that I don’t feel good about, anything that I’d change, but I think we’re about ready to commit a disaster.’” Elder Scott said that this one comment stopped the discussion. He remembered that when the same item came up on the agenda at the next meeting, President Hunter looked around the room. No one said anything. Then President Hunter wisely said, “I see there’s still unsettled feelings about this; we’re not going to make a decision today.”

Elder Scott continued, “Now that’s the way I think the Lord wants us to relate to each other—to not force things, not be in such a hurry . . . , but to truly let the Spirit guide, and sometimes that takes time. But it’s better to make the right decision guided by the Spirit than make one that

meets a time schedule or to check off an agenda item.”²

Principle 3: Move Forward with Faith

Elder Scott’s comment about not forcing a decision is echoed by Elder Hales, who shared a story that illustrates the need for patience and faith in seeking heaven’s help:

“As a General Authority, I was assigned to help reorganize a stake presidency under the direction of Elder Ezra Taft Benson. After praying, interviewing, studying, and praying again, Elder Benson asked if I knew who the new president would be. I said I had not received that inspiration yet. He looked at me for a long time and replied he hadn’t either. However, we *were* inspired to ask three worthy priesthood holders to speak in the Saturday evening session of conference. Moments after the third speaker began, the Spirit prompted me that he should be the new stake president. I looked over at President Benson and

saw tears streaming down his face. Revelation had been given to both of us—but only by continuing to seek our Heavenly Father’s will as we moved forward in faith.”³

Principle 4: Let the Spirit Help You See Others’ Points of View

Counseling together is not always a smooth experience. Individuals with strong opinions can prevent a group from coming to a consensus. In such situations, humility and a willingness to be guided by the Spirit can move the group through the impasse.

Elder Scott gave this advice: “Humility is teachability by the Holy Spirit. . . . When we are humble in that sense, we can be prompted by the Lord. . . .

“[One] way the Spirit might guide you is to lead you both to recognize each other’s point of view. And when there are differences, to try and understand where each one’s coming from so that you can reach an agreement . . . that’s not powered by either



individual's desires or point of view. . . .

"Another [way the Spirit might guide us is in] the ability to change. We aren't just necessarily born with the right decisions in our mind. Sometimes we need to adjust . . . our perspective. . . . The Twelve do this all the time by talking about an issue. We may begin at opposite points, but we talk it through and the Spirit guides what [each person] says. . . . And pretty soon we're beginning to coalesce an agreement—not a forced agreement—but an honest agreement and a direction to take. . . .

"It generally requires some relaxation of my own feelings, some accommodation of my own desires and feelings, so the group can make a unanimous decision that is satisfactory but may not absolutely meet the desires of every individual. You make some concession, not a major one necessarily, but some concession—never a concession in principle, but maybe in approach, so that we can get a decision that works."⁴

Principle 5: Look to the Person Who Presides to Confirm the Inspiration

Elder M. Russell Ballard shared an experience President David O. McKay (1873–1970) related of a council meeting in which the Apostles were considering a question of great importance. President McKay and the other Apostles "felt strongly about a certain course of action that should be taken, and they were prepared to share their feelings in a meeting with the First Presidency. To their surprise, President Joseph F. Smith [President of the Church at the time] did not ask for their opinion in the matter, as was his custom. Rather, he arose and said, "This is what the Lord wants."⁵

Even though the decision was different from what the President of the Twelve,

Francis M. Lyman, had decided, President Lyman "was the first on his feet to say, 'Brethren, I move that that becomes the opinion and judgment of this Council.'"

The motion was seconded and then agreed upon unanimously. "Six months did not pass before the wisdom of that leader was demonstrated," wrote President McKay.⁶

"When a council leader reaches a decision," Elder Ballard concluded, "the council members should sustain it wholeheartedly."⁷

Years ago, President Stephen L. Richards (1879–1959), First Counselor to President David O. McKay, testified that "in the spirit under which we labor, men [and women] can get together with seemingly divergent views and far different backgrounds, and under the operation of that spirit, by counseling together, they can arrive at an accord. . . .

"I have no hesitancy in giving you the assurance, if you will confer in council as you are expected to do, God will give you solutions to the problems that confront you."⁸

What works for the General Authorities can work for wards, branches, and families—indeed, for any group of people, large or small—seeking inspiration from our Heavenly Father. ■

NOTES

1. Robert D. Hales, "Personal Revelation: The Teachings and Examples of the Prophets," *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 87.
2. Richard G. Scott, in "A Conversation on 'Act under the Direction of the Spirit'" (interview, Leadership Enrichment Series for Church employees, Salt Lake City, Feb. 23, 2011).
3. Robert D. Hales, "Personal Revelation," 87–88.
4. Richard G. Scott, in "A Conversation on 'Act under the Direction of the Spirit.'"
5. M. Russell Ballard, "Strength in Counsel," *Ensign*, Nov. 1993, 78.
6. David O. McKay, *Gospel Ideals*, 264, in M. Russell Ballard, "Strength in Counsel," 78.
7. M. Russell Ballard, "Strength in Counsel," 78.
8. Stephen L. Richards, in Conference Report, Oct. 1953, 86.



Perfect Order in All Things

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught a group of priesthood leaders a principle that all those in counsel with one another could well adopt:

"Each [person in the council] should speak in his turn and in his place, and in his time and season, that there may be perfect order in all things; and . . . every man . . . should be sure that he can throw light upon the subject rather than spread darkness, . . . which may be done by men applying themselves closely to study the mind and will of the Lord, whose Spirit always makes manifest and demonstrates the truth to the understanding of all who are in possession of the Spirit."

History of the Church, 2:370.