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“I Was a Stranger”

Prayerfully determine what you can do—according to your own time and circumstance—to serve the refugees living in your neighborhoods and communities.

On the day Relief Society was organized, Emma Smith declared: “We are going to do something extraordinary. . . . We expect extraordinary occasions and pressing calls.”¹ Those pressing calls and extraordinary occasions presented themselves frequently then—as they do now.

One came in the October 1856 general conference as President Brigham Young announced to the congregation that handcart pioneers were still on the trail and late in the season. He declared: “Your faith, religion, and profession of religion, will never save one soul of you in the celestial kingdom of our God, unless you carry out just such principles as I am now teaching you. Go and bring in those people now on the plains, and attend strictly to those things which we call temporal, . . . otherwise your faith will be in vain.”²

We remember with grateful admiration the men who headed off to rescue those suffering Saints. But what did the sisters do?

“Sister [Lucy Meserve] Smith recorded . . . that after President Young’s exhortation, those in attendance took action. . . . Women [removed] their petticoats [large underskirts that were part

of the fashion of the day and that also provided warmth], stockings, and every thing they could spare, right there in the [old] Tabernacle, and piled [them] into the wagons to send to the Saints in the mountains.”³

Several weeks later, President Brigham Young gathered the Saints again in the old Tabernacle as the rescuers and the handcart companies got closer to Salt Lake City. With great urgency, he pleaded with the Saints—especially the sisters—to nurse the sufferers and feed them and receive

them, saying: “Some you will find with their feet frozen to their ankles; some are frozen to their knees and some have their hands frosted. . . . We want you to receive them as your own children, and to have the same feeling for them.”⁴

Lucy Meserve Smith also recorded: “We did all we could, with the aid of the good brethren and sisters, to comfort the needy. . . . They got their hands and feet badly frosted. . . . We did not cease our exertions [un]til all were made comfortable. . . .

“I never took more satisfaction and, I might say, pleasure in any labor I ever performed in my life, such a unanimity of feeling prevailed. . . .

“What comes next for willing hands to do?”⁵

My beloved sisters, this account might be likened to our day and those who are suffering throughout the world. Another “extraordinary occasion” touches our hearts.

There are more than 60 million refugees, including forcibly displaced people, worldwide. Half of those are children.⁶ “These individuals have undergone tremendous difficulties



and are starting over in . . . new countr[ies] and culture[s]. While there are [sometimes] organizations that help them with a place to live and basic necessities, what they need is a friend and ally who can help them [adjust] to their new home, a person who can help them learn the language, understand the systems, and feel connected.”⁷



After living for years as refugees, Yvette Bugingo (above) and other members of her family met a caring couple who helped them adjust to a new home.

Last summer I met Sister Yvette Bugingo, who at age 11 fled from place to place after her father was killed and three of her brothers went missing in a war-torn part of the world. Yvette and the remaining family members eventually lived for six and a half years as refugees in a neighboring country until they were able to move to a permanent home, where they were blessed by a caring couple who helped with transportation, schools, and other things. She said they “were basically an answer to our prayers.”⁸ Her beautiful mother and adorable little sister are with us tonight, singing in the choir. I have wondered many times since meeting these wonderful women, “What if *their* story were *my* story?”

As sisters we make up more than half of the Lord’s storehouse to help

Heavenly Father’s children. His storehouse is not composed just of goods but also of time, talents, skills, and our divine nature. Sister Rosemary M. Wixom has taught, “The divine nature within us ignites our desire to reach out to others and prompts us to act.”⁹

Recognizing our divine nature, President Russell M. Nelson urged:

“We need women who know how to make important things happen by their faith and who are courageous defenders of morality and families in a sin-sick world . . . ; women who know how to call upon the powers of heaven to protect and strengthen children and families. . . .

“ . . . Married or single, you sisters possess distinctive capabilities and special intuition you have received as gifts from God. We brethren cannot duplicate your unique influence.”¹⁰

A First Presidency letter sent to the Church on October 27, 2015, expressed great concern and compassion for the millions of people who have fled their homes seeking relief from civil conflict and other hardships. The First Presidency invited individuals, families, and Church units to participate in Christlike service in local refugee relief projects and to contribute to the Church humanitarian fund, where practical.

The general presidencies of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary have considered how to respond to the First Presidency’s invitation. We know that you, our beloved sisters of all ages, come from all walks of life and live in varied circumstances. Each member of this worldwide sisterhood has covenanted at baptism to “comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”¹¹ Yet we must remember that none of us should run faster than we have strength.¹²

With these truths in mind, we have organized a relief effort called “I Was

a Stranger.” It is our hope that you will prayerfully determine what you can do—according to your own time and circumstance—to serve the refugees living in your neighborhoods and communities. This is an opportunity to serve one on one, in families, and by organization to offer friendship, mentoring, and other Christlike service and is one of many ways sisters can serve.

In all our prayerful efforts, we should apply the wise counsel of King Benjamin, given to his people after he exhorted them to care for those in need: “See that all these things are done in wisdom and order.”¹³

Sisters, we know that reaching out to others with love matters to the Lord. Consider these scriptural admonitions:

“The stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself.”¹⁴

“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”¹⁵

And the Savior said:

“For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

“Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me.”¹⁶

The Savior lovingly acknowledged the widow whose contribution was only two mites because she did what she could.¹⁷ He also told the parable of the good Samaritan, which He concluded saying, “Go, and do thou likewise.”¹⁸ Sometimes reaching out is inconvenient. But when we work together in love and unity, we can expect heaven’s help.

At the funeral services for a remarkable daughter of God, someone shared that this sister, as stake

Relief Society president, worked with others in her stake to contribute quilts to give warmth to suffering people in Kosovo during the 1990s. And like the good Samaritan, she went out of her way to do more as she and her daughter drove a truck filled with those quilts from London to Kosovo. On her journey home she received an unmistakable spiritual impression that sank deep into her heart. The impression was this: “What you have done is a very good thing. Now go home, walk across the street, and serve your neighbor!”¹⁹

The funeral was filled with additional inspiring accounts of how this faithful woman recognized and responded to the extraordinary and pressing calls—and also the ordinary occasions—of those within her sphere of influence. For example, she opened her home and her heart to help struggling young people at any hour—day or night.

My beloved sisters, we can be assured of Heavenly Father’s help as we get down on our knees and ask for divine guidance to bless His children. Heavenly Father; our Savior, Jesus Christ; and the Holy Ghost are ready to help.

President Henry B. Eyring bore this powerful testimony to the women of the Church:

“Heavenly Father hears and answers your prayers of faith for guidance and for help to endure in your service for Him.

“The Holy Ghost is sent to you and to those you care for. You will be strengthened and yet inspired to know the limits and extent of your ability to serve. The Spirit will comfort you when you may wonder, ‘Did I do enough?’”²⁰

As we consider the “pressing calls” of those who need our help, let’s ask



ourselves, “What if *their* story were *my* story?” May we then seek inspiration, act on impressions we receive, and reach out in unity to help those in need as we are able and inspired to do so. Perhaps then it might be said of us, as the Savior said of a loving sister who ministered to Him: “She hath wrought a good work. . . . She hath done what she could.”²¹ I call that extraordinary! In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. Emma Smith, in *Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society* (2011), 14.
2. Brigham Young, in *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 36.
3. *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 36–37.
4. Brigham Young, in James E. Faust, “Go Bring Them in from the Plains,” *Ensign*, July 1997, 7; *Liahona*, Nov. 1997, 7; see also LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration 1856–1860* (1960), 139.
5. Lucy Meserve Smith, in Jill Mulvay Derr and others, eds., *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History* (2016), 217, 218, spelling and punctuation

standardized; see also *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 37.

6. See “Facts and Figures about Refugees,” unhcr.org.uk/about-us/key-facts-and-figures.html.
7. “40 Ways to Help Refugees in Your Community,” Sept. 9, 2015, mormonchannel.org.
8. Email from Yvette Bugingo, Mar. 12, 2016.
9. Rosemary M. Wixom, “Discovering the Divinity Within,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2015, 8. Emily Woodmansee, one of those rescued in 1856 in the Willie handcart company, described divine nature this way (with a slight alteration on my part): *The errand of angels is given to women; And this is a gift that, as sisters, we claim: To do whatsoever is gentle and [Christlike], To cheer and to bless in [the Savior’s] name.* (“As Sisters in Zion,” *Hymns*, no. 309)
10. Russell M. Nelson, “A Plea to My Sisters,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2015, 96, 97.
11. Mosiah 18:9.
12. See Mosiah 4:27.
13. Mosiah 4:27.
14. Leviticus 19:34.
15. Hebrews 13:2.
16. Matthew 25:35–36.
17. See Luke 21:1–4.
18. Luke 10:37.
19. Funeral service for Rosemary Curtis Neider, Jan. 2015.
20. Henry B. Eyring, “The Caregiver,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2012, 124.
21. Mark 14:6, 8.