



By Elder D. Todd Christofferson

Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

## ELDER GERRIT W. GONG: **Love the Lord and Trust Him**

**A** newly married graduate student at England's University of Oxford, Gerrit W. Gong learned through personal experience that when we love the Lord and trust Him, He will help us, guide us, and strengthen us.

Gerrit was a Rhodes Scholar working to complete two graduate degrees, one of them a doctorate. At the same time, he was serving in the Oxford Ward bishopric. He and his wife, Susan, remembered advice that Elder David B. Haight (1906–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave when he performed their marriage in the Salt Lake Temple. “He told us always to have a calling,” Elder Gong says. “We knew if we trusted God and did our best, He would help us.”

Gerrit and Susan did receive “divine help and tender mercies,” he says. While continuing in the bishopric, Gerrit finished all the academic requirements for a doctoral degree, except his dissertation. He asked the bishop of the Oxford Ward, Alan Webster, for a priesthood blessing. In the blessing, Gerrit received this promise: “Continue doing all you can, and the Lord will bless you.”

Two ward members who were experienced legal secretaries volunteered to help type his manuscript, and Gerrit was able to finish his dissertation in a few months. In fact, he completed both a master's and a doctoral degree in just

over three years. Upon graduation he also accepted a faculty research position at the university. His experience at Oxford strengthened his trust in the Lord, trust that endures to this day and will continue to bless Gerrit W. Gong as he now serves in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

### **Loaves and Fishes**

“The Lord is kind and gracious and seeks to bless us,” Elder Gong says. “If we do our best, He will enable us to do more than we otherwise could. It's like the multiplication of loaves and fishes. The Lord takes what is available and magnifies it far beyond what we could do on our own.”

The loaves-and-fishes principle is also true with learning, he says. “Even when formal education is unavailable,





the spirit of learning is what counts, because learning is eternal. We can all seek for light and truth, regardless of our circumstances. When we do, the Lord will help us find it.”

### **Covenant Belonging**

While at Oxford, Elder Gong learned another gospel principle, one he calls “covenant belonging.”

“As we draw closer to the Lord, we also draw closer to each other,” he says. “At Oxford, Susan and I treasured our ward experience just as much as our academic experience. Many of our dearest friends to this day are people from

Elder Gong attributes much of his happiness to his parents, Jean and Walter, and to his wife, Susan. His parents’ home “was filled with a deep reverence for God’s love for each of His children,” he says. When Elder Gong met his wife for the first time, he felt like Susan was someone he had always known.

the Oxford Ward.”

Among those friends are Tim and Kathryn Witts, who remember going to the temple with the Gongs. “I remember clearly that Brother Gong removed his watch so he would not be distracted or constrained by time when contemplating the matters of eternity,” Sister Witts says. “That small act has helped me to be more diligent in my own temple worship.”

The Gongs often meet friends they know because of the gospel. “People will say, ‘We worked with you when you were on the high council,’ things like that,” Elder Gong says, “and it goes both ways. I am

grateful for a stake president and a ward council who helped me as a young bishop. We are all indebted to parents, in-laws, neighbors, mission presidents, sisters, and priesthood leaders who are kind to us, guide us, and encourage us to come unto Christ.”

### **Family Heritage**

Elder Gong’s family history traces back 34 generations to First Dragon Gong, born in AD 837. Elder Gong’s grandparents emigrated from China to the United States. His mother, Jean, joined the Church as a teenager in Hawaii, USA, and later attended Brigham

Young University in Provo, Utah, USA, where she stayed with the family of Gerrit de Jong, the first dean of the College of Fine Arts. “The de Jongs helped me understand what a gospel family is like,” she says.

After BYU, Jean attended Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, USA, where she met Walter A. Gong. “He was already a Christian and quickly understood what the restored gospel offers,” Jean says. He joined the Church, and a year later they were married in the Salt Lake Temple. Both became professional educators and collectively spent more than 70 years teaching.

“Dad also became a patriarch,” Elder Gong says, “and because patriarchal blessings were given in our home, our home was filled with a deep reverence for God’s love for each of His children.”

On December 23, 1953, in Redwood City, California, the first of Jean and Walter’s three children was born. “His given name, Gerrit, is Dutch, to honor Gerrit de Jong,” Jean explains. “His middle name is Walter, to honor his father. And our family name is Chinese, which honors his heritage.”

Jean says Gerrit was considerate to his younger siblings, Brian and Marguerite. “He liked to help them,” she says, “even with little things like teaching them to tie their shoes.” She remembers coming home from church one day and overhearing Gerrit and Brian saying they thought a sacrament meeting talk was boring. “So I challenged them: ‘Then you come up with a better talk.’ They took the challenge and started paying more attention to all the talks,” she says.

As a teenager, Gerrit loved to go backpacking and hiking with the other young men in his

From left: Marjorie and Gordon B. Hinckley greeted Gerrit and Susan at the Gongs’ wedding reception. As a missionary in Taiwan, Elder Gong taught a family and years later, as a General Authority, met the grandson of one of the daughters in the family. In Vietnam, Elder and Sister Gong painted a mural as a way to bring joy to children facing challenges. Members of the Gong family gathered with those who assisted in painting the mural in Vietnam.

ward. Wally Salbacka, a lifelong friend, remembers one camping trip in particular. “I was there with Gerrit and his brother, Brian, and a friend who wasn’t a member of our Church. For some reason, we started singing hymns. Gerrit sang melody, Brian sang tenor, and I sang bass. I think we sang 10 or 20 hymns, just for the joy of singing. It was a good experience. Our nonmember friend was impressed.”

Brother Salbacka also remembers that in high school, Gerrit asked the cheerleaders to



lead silent cheers for the chess team. “He convinced them that moral support is good for everybody,” he says, “and they actually came to a match!”

After high school, Elder Gong attended Brigham Young University. From

1973 to 1975, he served in the Taiwan Taipei Mission, then returned to BYU, where in 1977 he received a bachelor’s degree in Asian studies and university studies.

### Courtship and Marriage

After his mission, Elder Gong volunteered to provide Sunday evening firesides at the Provo Missionary Training Center. The firesides helped acquaint missionaries headed to Taiwan with the people, customs, and culture

there. One of the missionaries was Sister Susan Lindsay from Taylorsville, Utah, the daughter of Richard P. and Marian B. Lindsay. Brother Lindsay was a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy. “I felt Susan was someone I had always known,” Elder Gong says.

Two years later, some months after Susan had returned to BYU following her mission, Gerrit was in Provo with his family. His father was teaching at the university, and Gerrit had planned a two-week visit. The visit was extended to four weeks, as he and Susan dated every day. Then Gerrit left for an internship in Hawaii before returning to Oxford.

“We courted from two different hemispheres,” Elder Gong recalls. “I was trying to study in England while learning everything I could about her from across the Atlantic Ocean.”

“We got engaged over the telephone,” Sister Gong says.



“He came home again at Thanksgiving, and we were married the first day the temple opened in the new year.” Two weeks later, they flew to England to start a new life together.

“When people get married, they talk about two families becoming one,” Elder Gong says. “And that’s what truly happened to me. I feel part of the Lindsay family, just as I am part of the Gong family.”

### **A Stellar Career**

After he spent a brief time on the faculty at Oxford, Gerrit’s career shifted to government service in Washington, D.C., USA. In 1984 he served on the staff of the Reagan-Bush reelection campaign, where he shared office space with Mike Leavitt, who later became governor of Utah. “Gerrit was observant and thoughtful,” Brother Leavitt says, “but he was distinguished by his unrelenting kindness.”

In 1985 Gerrit served as special assistant to the Under Secretary of the State Department. In 1987 he became a special assistant to the U.S. ambassador in Beijing, China. And from 1989 to 2001, he filled several positions at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. He then returned to the academic world when he accepted a position as an assistant to the president for strategic planning at BYU. He spent nine years in that role.

Carri Jenkins, assistant to the president for university communications at BYU, was in the office next door. She remembers Gerrit Gong’s ability to encourage those around him. “If you didn’t have confidence that you could take on a difficult assignment, he had that confidence for you,” she says. “He did everything in his power to counsel you, give you hope, and let you go forward and prove yourself.”





Federal judge Thomas B. Griffith, who knew Elder Gong both in Washington and at BYU, describes interaction with him this way: “At the end of a conversation, you realize the focus has been you. He’s a great listener. And he asks questions that make you think.”

Cecil O. Samuelson, emeritus General Authority Seventy and former president of BYU, says Elder Gong is “generally quiet, but the wheels are always turning.”

### Family Life

Gerrit and Susan Gong became the parents of four sons—Abraham, Samuel, Christopher, and Matthew—who grew up in a variety of settings.

“When we were in Beijing, our children had the blessing of becoming each other’s best friends,” Elder Gong says.

“On the one hand, they had the opportunity to see an expansive view of the world,” Sister Gong adds. “On the other hand, it helped us become tight-knit as a family. Our boys still say the best thing we did as parents was to give them brothers.”

“Once, we cashed in our frequent-flyer miles,” Elder Gong says. “We let each person choose a destination. We started in Washington, D.C., where we were living, then went to England, the Czech Republic, Greece, Turkey, India, China, and Japan.”

“We had one firm rule during that trip,” Susan says. “Wherever we went, we ate what local people ate.” Finally, in Japan at the end of the trip, Elder Gong told his sons he was taking them to a restaurant world-famous for beef. At McDonald’s, four hungry sons and two parents consumed 17 hamburgers!

“Both Mom and Dad put a high value on learning by

experience,” Abraham says. “Dad thinks deeply about how experiences shape people, including whole cultures.” Abraham also notes that his father “speaks carefully because he has to mean completely and believe fully what he says.”

Sam remembers that “as busy as he was at the State Department, Dad took time every night to coach and train me for a third-grade math competition that I wanted to be in, called ‘Challenge 24.’ He said if I won, we’d have a party with ice-cream sundaes and 24 toppings.” Sam made it to the national finals but didn’t win. The Gong family had sundaes anyway. But it wasn’t easy to come up with 24 toppings—one was beef jerky.

Christopher and Matthew comment on how much they “appreciate the trust, love, and devotion our father and mother share.” It is a love Elder and Sister Gong share with each other as well as with each son and with the extended family.

“As well as a devoted father, Gerrit is a devoted son and brother,” Susan says. “Those roles are important to him. He



helps us understand that family relationships are most important of all.”

### Church Experience

Although busy with career and family, Elder Gong continued willingly to serve in the Church, fulfilling callings as a high counselor, high priests group leader, stake Sunday School president, seminary teacher, bishop, stake mission president, stake president, and Area Seventy.

Whatever he is called to do, and in his family life as well, he consistently demonstrates



certain characteristics. “He sees everyone as a son or daughter of Heavenly Father,” Sister Gong says. “But above all, he loves the Lord. He really desires with all his heart to build the kingdom and bless Heavenly Father’s children.”

And he admires his wife. “Whatever I am asked to do,” he says, “Susan is by my side. She is comfortable with everyone and oriented to other people. She has always been willing to go to new places and try new things, for which I am grateful.”



From left: In Thailand, Elder Gong met with His Eminence Francis Xavier Cardinal Kriengsak Kovithavanij, the Catholic Archbishop of Bangkok. Elder Gong enjoys one-on-one trips with his sons, such as this trip in Canada with his son Sam. Elder Gong shared his thoughts about the Bread of Life with seminary and institute teachers in 2017. Sister Gong exchanges greetings in the home of a Cambodian member.

### Service with the Seventy

On April 3, 2010, Elder Gerrit W. Gong was sustained as a General Authority Seventy. He was assigned to the Asia Area Presidency, headquartered in Hong Kong. He later became the Asia Area President. On October 6, 2015, Elder Gong was sustained to the Presidency of the Seventy, where his international experience continued, including area reviews in various parts of the world such as Africa and Central America.

“You meet and come to love the Saints in all these places,” he says. “You feel blessed to have people tell you about their faith, because their experience of God working in their lives becomes part of understanding who God is and how He loves each of us.”

“When we send Elder Gong into any situation, those involved feel they have found a friend,” says President Russell M. Nelson. “He has a high level of knowledge, but he is humble. He relates with people at all levels and is always well-prepared and persuasive.”

### Calling as an Apostle

When President Nelson extended the calling for Elder Gong to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, the prophet “lovingly took my hands in his, [with] my dear Susan at my side, and extended this sacred call from the Lord that took my breath away” (“Christ the Lord Is Risen Today,” *Ensign*, May 2018, 97). Humbled, but certain of his love for and trust in the Lord, Elder Gong accepted the call. He was sustained on March 31, 2018. Carefully prepared by the Lord, he will now minister as a “special [witness] of the name of Christ in all the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:23). ■