



On

March 17, 1842,

minutes after she became president of the new Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, Emma Smith spoke on the purpose of that society. “To seek out and relieve the distressed,” she said. To “be ambitious to do good” and “watch over the morals.”¹

“The Society is not only to relieve the poor, but to save souls.”²
— Joseph Smith



An Outpouring of the Spirit

Speaking with tenderness and power on this 175th anniversary of Relief Society, the General Presidency shares their feelings, insights, and testimonies with us as Relief Society sisters.

*W*e love the sisters throughout the Church,” says Linda K. Burton, General President of the Relief Society, speaking for herself and her counselors—Carole M. Stephens, First Counselor, and Linda S. Reeves, Second Counselor. “What more could we want than to help each other along the covenant path toward eternal life? God revealed His purpose in Moses 1:39: ‘For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man [and woman].’ In Relief Society we help prepare women for the blessings of eternal life. We do this through increasing faith in Heavenly Father and in Jesus Christ and His Atonement, strengthening individuals, families, and homes through ordinances and covenants, and working in unity to help those in need.”³

“As we remember and live the purpose of Relief Society, we as Latter-day Saint women will become ‘distinct and different—in happy ways,’⁴ yielding a significant influence for good throughout the world. *That is what we want for our sisters in Relief Society.*”

Here, in an interview with Church magazines staff, the members of the Relief Society General Presidency answer questions of concern for today and share their vision for the future.



Nauvoo Relief Society established in the Red Brick Store.



First Utah Relief Societies formed to make clothing for Native American women and children.

1840

1842

1844

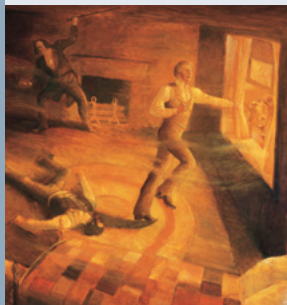
1850

1854



EMMA H. SMITH
1842

Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.



DETAIL FROM MARTYRDOM OF JOSEPH AND HYRUM, BY GARY ERNEST SMITH



In

Utah

Relief Societies continued working to save souls and attend to needs. Relief Societies also ministered to arriving immigrants, including the survivors of the Willie and Martin handcart companies, providing supplies, food, and medical care. Beginning in 1868, local ward Relief Societies began to construct halls in which to meet, care for the poor, conduct business, and sell goods. The construction of ward Relief Society halls ended in 1924.

1. What is it about Relief Society that unifies women from different cultures and diverse situations?

Sister Burton: Knowing and living our purpose unites us across cultures. I met a woman in Uruguay last year who told me how she had been called to be Relief Society president at the darkest time of her life. She was tempted to say, “I can’t do it right now.” But because she had made sacred covenants, she said, “I will do what I’ve been asked to do. I have faith in Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. I know through His Atonement I can do it.” Then she said to me, “My calling brought light into my life as I served my sisters. I relied upon the Lord, and He blessed me.”

I recognized the purpose of Relief Society in her story. Her faith in Heavenly Father and in Jesus Christ and His Atonement helped her. She had made sacred covenants and wanted to keep them. As she worked in unity with the bishop, she fulfilled her calling. Now she

has a testimony that the Lord blesses us when we trust Him. I add my testimony to hers that our Savior Jesus Christ will help us through every mortal challenge and everything that seems unfair in this life.

Sister Stephens: Our faith in the power of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice is the great unifier. Our love for our Heavenly Father and knowledge of His great plan of happiness bind us together as we seek eternal life. Our sisters are single, married with children, or married without children. There are widows and those who are divorced. Our hope is that we can all work in unity and be one as we come to understand our identity, our work, and our purpose.

Sister Reeves: Unity brings us happiness because there is no contention and the love of God dwells in our hearts (see 4 Nephi 1:15). Unity crosses every line. Oh, how we want our sisters to



Eliza R. Snow called by Brigham Young to oversee the establishment of Relief Society throughout the Church.

Woman's Exponent newspaper began publication and became the voice of the Relief Society for 50 years.

1860

The first Relief Society meeting hall was constructed by the Salt Lake 15th Ward Relief Society. Over 120 halls were constructed in the next 50 years.



1868

1870

Utah women were among the first in the United States to vote.

1872



1880

ELIZA R. SNOW
1866



feel that love for the Savior. Oh, how we want to be one in helping accomplish His purposes.

2. What can women do if they don't feel part of Relief Society?

Sister Stephens: The desire of our hearts as a presidency is that sisters understand their eternal identity.

We've always been part of God's work. As women we have been endowed with special gifts to profit everyone. We were taught and trained in the premortal life what our work would be. We were in that great Council in Heaven where we chose Heavenly Father's plan, which included the Atonement of Jesus Christ. We shouted for joy at the prospect of having a mortal body.

On earth, beginning with Mother Eve, women continue to be part of God's work. The Prophet Joseph Smith organized women after the pattern of the priesthood—a pattern that has always existed—when he organized the Relief Society in 1842 in Nauvoo, Illinois.

President Russell M. Nelson, President



Deseret Silk Association founded under the leadership of Relief Society General President Zina D. H. Young.

Primary organization began.

1875



1876

Emmeline B. Wells led the new grain storage program.

1878



1880

Second Relief Society General Presidency set apart.

The

most long-lived

economic enterprise of the Relief Society was the grain storage program: 1876–1918. During a wheat shortage near the end of World War I, they sold it at the unrefusable request of the U.S. government. The interest from this wheat money was used to decrease maternal and infant mortality, fund clinics for pregnant women and young children, sponsor healthcare education classes, and stockpile supplies for childbirth.

of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, has counseled us, “Learn *for yourselves* who you really are. Ask your Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ how He feels about you and your mission here on earth. If you ask with real intent, over time the Spirit will whisper the life-changing truths to you. Record those impressions, review them often, and follow through with exactness.”

“I promise you that when you catch even a glimpse of how your Heavenly Father sees you and what He is counting on you to do for Him, your life will never be the same!”⁵ Go to the temple and listen! Listen for who you are and what you will do.

3. How can women whose lives are terribly busy still enjoy the blessings of Relief Society?

Sister Stephens: It comes down to priorities. I recently spent time in West Africa, and I saw women carrying water from the

well on their head daily and then go to work to help provide for their families. At times I was overwhelmed with the poverty. Then I spent time with the members of the Church at the training meetings in their bright white shirts and homemade colorful dresses.

I was taught that they are rich in the things money can't buy. I learned that they put the most important things first. The gospel means everything



The Relief Society established the Deseret Hospital.

1882



“The Relief Society . . . was first organized nearly half a century ago . . . to dispense temporal blessings to the poor and needy; and to give encouragement to the weak, and restrain the erring ones, and for the better development, and exercise of woman’s sympathies, and charities, that she might have opportunity to attain spiritual strength, and power for the accomplishment of greater good in the work of the redemption of the human family.”⁸—Zina D. H. Young

1887



Relief Society women organized Utah and Idaho chapters of the Woman Suffrage Organization in 1889.⁷

ZINA D. H. YOUNG
1888

1889

President Zina D. H. Young organized the first Relief Society general conference.

1890

1891

Relief Society was a charter member of the National Council of Women in the United States.



to them. They told me, “I don’t need anything. I have everything I need—I have the gospel and my family.” When we put the most important things first, other things will naturally drop out of our lives.

4. What does Relief Society have to offer young women?

Sister Burton: Young women have the opportunity to help fulfill prophecy when they progress into Relief Society. In 1979, President Spencer W.

Kimball (1895–1985) prophesied that good women of the world “will be drawn to the Church in large numbers . . . to the degree that the women of the Church are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world.”⁶ We need the unique gifts, perspective, and talents that young women bring to help fulfill this prophecy.

Of President Kimball’s prophecy, President Russell M. Nelson said in 2015 to women of all ages—including young



First single sisters set apart to serve as proselyting missionaries.



The Relief Society Magazine contained discourses, inspirational fiction and poetry, biographies, and informational articles, including monthly lesson plans.

1896

Utah achieved statehood.

1898



1900

1902

First Relief Society handbook published, with a history, speeches, and instructions.



BATHSHEBA W. SMITH
1901

First editor, Susa Young Gates.



EMMELINE B. WELLS
1910

1914

Relief Society Magazine began publication. Woman's Exponent came to an end.

The

Social Services

Department was established by Amy Brown Lyman in 1918 at the request of Church President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918). Sister Lyman also organized courses to train Relief Society members in the professional methods of social work. During the early years of the Great Depression, the department managed an enormous caseload and coordinated with local and federal government officials to distribute aid to the needy.

women, “You are the women [President Kimball] foresaw! . . .

“ . . . We need women who have a bedrock understanding of the doctrine of Christ. . . . We need women who know how to access the power that God makes available to covenant keepers. . . . We need women who have the courage and vision of our Mother Eve. . . .

“ . . . I plead with you to fulfill President Kimball’s prophecy. . . . As you do so, the Holy Ghost will magnify your influence in an unprecedented way!”⁹

Sister Reeves: We are all “daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him.”¹⁰ In Relief Society, you will find we are more alike than different. For example, we’re all in a world with social media, advertising, and worldly role models. The value of women is being defined by the world. Comparing ourselves to what we see and hear in the world can make us feel like this is how we need to be. Now more than ever, we all need to remember

our value comes from being a daughter of God—not from what the world portrays we should be. Our strength comes from our relationship with our Father in Heaven, our Savior, and each other as sisters in the gospel. Draw upon that.

Sister Stephens: Young women, God needs you and we need you. You are the rising generation born with strength to stand strong against the challenges in these latter days. Join us as we become women who understand Jesus Christ and His Atonement, women who will make and keep sacred covenants, and women who will work in unity with each other and with priesthood leaders. It’s a blessing to be a woman of any age in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today. Let’s share our testimonies of who we are and who we are becoming. Let’s share our messages of joy, rejoicing with each other!

The Church Social Services Department was the precursor to today's LDS Family Services and LDS Humanitarian Services.

Church welfare program established in 1936.

Clothing, food, bandages, and thousands of quilts made by sisters in North America and Europe were sent to aid the Saints in postwar Europe.



1918

Relief Society focused on wheat sold to United States government.

1921

Relief Society focused on improving infant and maternal mortality rates.

1930

To help Utah benefit from the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921, Amy Brown Lyman ran for the state House of Representatives and won in 1923. The goal of the Sheppard-Towner Act was to reduce maternal and infant mortality. Sister Lyman coordinated government and Relief Society programs. By 1928 these efforts had improved infant death rates by 19 percent and maternal death rates by 8 percent.

1936



1940

Relief Society members engaged in war-relief work.

CLARISSA S. WILLIAMS
1921



LOUISE Y. ROBISON
1928



AMY B. LYMAN
1940



5. Why is it important for priesthood holders and Relief Society sisters to work together in unity?

Sister Burton: Men and women have complementary roles. Each of us brings with us our unique gifts and talents to contribute to the work of the kingdom and to strengthen one another. Women are half of the Lord's storehouse, vital to the work. We bring a perspective and a desire to contribute to building the kingdom that began with Eve, continued with Sarah, Rebekah, Esther, Mary, Elisabeth, Emma, Eliza, and other valiant sisters of this last dispensation and anciently.

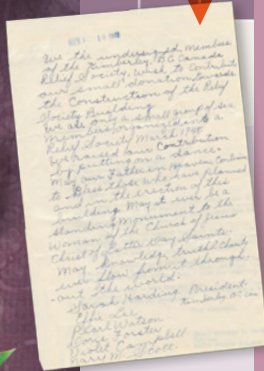
As we think about power and influence, power is usually associated with priesthood power. But the influence of a righteous woman carries tremendous power as well. The same virtues mentioned in Doctrine and Covenants 121:41 that invite priesthood power are the same virtues that invite the power of a woman's influence—"persuasion," "long-suffering," "gentleness and meekness," and "love unfeigned." These things are inherent in our divine nature, and therein lies our opportunity to influence for good in a powerful way.





The six-member Relief Society in Kimberley, British Columbia, organized a dance to raise funds to help construct the Relief Society Building in Salt Lake City.

Dedicated in 1956, the Relief Society Building provided work and meeting space for members of the board and General Presidency, editors of the Relief Society Magazine, and seamstresses who made temple clothing.



1949

First Relief Societies organized in Japan.



1956



1960



BELLE S. SPAFFORD
1945



PHOTOGRAPH OF RELIEF SOCIETY COMMEMORATIVE PLATE COURTESY OF CHURCH HISTORY MUSEUM

Relief Society Building open house.

During

the long administration of Relief Society General President Belle S. Spafford, the Relief Society and other Church auxiliaries joined in a larger Church process of correlation, aimed to eliminate redundant efforts, reduce waste, and foster stability in a rapidly growing worldwide church. Changes included the reorganization of Church magazines and the end of independent auxiliary bank accounts.

As we work in unity with our priesthood brothers, we become little by little a more Zion-like people (see Moses 7:18).

Sister Reeves: When we read “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” we see that our Heavenly Father uses the strengths of men and women according to the roles and responsibilities that will bring the optimum number of His children back to Him.¹¹ *The purpose of Relief Society helps us do that.*

6. What is it like for your presidency to work with the prophets?

Sister Burton: Just as Jesus Christ was a champion for women in His day, so are His Apostles in our day. Our prophets are thorough in their deliberations, always seeking input and the perspective of the sisters in the Church. I wish every sister in the Church could see and hear and feel what we get to experience in our association with prophets, seers, and

revelators on a regular basis. They are true disciples, selflessly and cheerfully giving their lives to the Lord as they seek to do His will and trust in His timing. They often testify that this Church belongs to Jesus Christ and that He leads and guides it.

Sister Reeves: When we have the ear of our leaders, which we have often, they petition us at an ever-increasing rate. The Brethren in these councils listen to and value what we say, and they work with us toward our common goals.

Sister Stephens: The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles are special witnesses of Jesus Christ. They know Him. They are becoming like Him. So if you want to understand the relationship that women leaders have with these witnesses of Jesus Christ, look at His example in the scriptures. Jesus Christ championed women, included women, and ennobled women. In councils with the Brethren, I have often looked at them

Belle S. Spafford was appointed president of the National Council of Women while serving as Relief Society General President.



General President Barbara B. Smith presented to the First Presidency a scroll representing 226,291 bushels of Relief Society wheat with a net worth of U.S. \$1,651,157 plus fund assets of over three quarters of a million dollars.



1966

Relief Society Magazine began publication in Spanish.

1968



1970

Final issue of Relief Society Magazine.

Ensign magazine began publication in January, 1971.

All female Church members age 18 and older were enrolled automatically in Relief Society.

1978

As women's traditional roles were being questioned, Relief Society leaders advocated for the importance of women's contributions to family and to society.

1980

1982

140th anniversary of Relief Society.

Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary co-sponsored events under the theme "Tribute to Women."

BARBARA B. SMITH
1974



BARBARA W. WINDER
1984



and thought, "This is a small portion of what it may feel like to be in the presence of the Savior."

7. What is the relationship between spiritual power and our covenants?

Sister Stephens: Spiritual power comes to us through the ordinances we receive and the covenants we make. There's also spiritual power that comes from keeping our covenants.

Spiritual power comes when we worthily partake of the sacrament on Sunday. This is when we can renew all the covenants that we have made with the Lord. We take His name upon us, "remember him," keep His commandments, and strive to always "have his Spirit to be with [us]" (D&C 20:77, 79).

Sister Burton: Of this spiritual power, Nephi said, "I, Nephi, beheld the power of the Lamb of God, that it descended upon the saints of the church of the Lamb" (1 Nephi 14:14). Isn't that term *saints* inclusive?

Nephi continues in the same verse to say that the power of the Lamb of God descended "upon the covenant people of the Lord, who were scattered upon all the face of the earth; and they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory." We as "covenant



Relief Society initiated the Gospel Literacy Effort to teach basic literacy skills to Church members who could not read or write.

Relief Society collected 350,000 quilts in response to a need for 30,000 quilts for Kosovo refugees.



1992

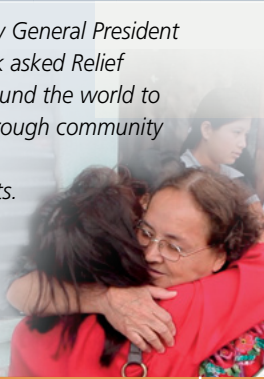
150th anniversary of Relief Society.

Relief Society General President Elaine L. Jack asked Relief Societies around the world to celebrate through community service and other projects.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON SWENSEN, DESERET NEWS



ELAINE L. JACK
1990



1999

General President Mary Ellen W. Smoot spoke at the second World Congress of Families, in Rome, Italy.



MARY ELLEN W. SMOOT
1997



PHOTOGRAPH OF MARY ELLEN SMOOT BY STUART JOHNSON, DESERET NEWS



BONNIE D. PARKIN
2002

Today,

thanks to the leadership of faithful Relief Society sisters over the past 175 years, Relief Societies throughout the world help those in need. For instance, Relief Society leaders in Caracas, Venezuela, wanted to find ways for the sisters to serve. They visited a facility for the elderly and were shown to a room of women who were lying curled up on the floor and not wearing any clothing. The Relief Society sisters wept as they bathed, dressed, and fed the women and cut their hair.

people”—both men and women—can be “armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory.” This is the divine destiny for all of God’s children who are covenant keepers.

Sister Stephens: Understanding the reach of our divine destiny is found in the answers to two questions: (1) Do you know who you are? (2) Do you know what you have? If we understood what we have, we’d understand that we have all that we need. Through the ordinances and covenants we make in the temple, we have the blessings, the power, and the authority of all things pertaining to priesthood. We’re not ordained. We don’t know why. Being ordained to the priesthood from father to son has been the order of God since the days of Adam and Eve.

Sister Reeves: I have a testimony that covenant-keeping women recognize that our Father has given us all we need to return to His presence through making and keeping covenants.

8. What is the most important thing you would like Relief Society sisters to remember?

Sister Burton: In Doctrine and Covenants 45:3 it says: “Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him.”

“Wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren [and sisters] that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (verse 5). I love Christ’s tenderness toward us. He is pleading our cause because He loves us! He wants us to come unto Him! Let us love and increase our faith in Jesus Christ and in our Heavenly Father.

As covenant daughters of God scattered upon all the face of the earth today, we are armed in great glory with righteousness and with the power of God. As we remember our purpose, rejoice in and keep our covenants, we will be seen as “distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world,” and we can help prepare the world for the return of our Savior Jesus Christ. ■