

President Thomas S. Monson:

# PROPHET AND FRIEND

*The emergency-room patient seemed ready to be released, but a Salt Lake City doctor and his staff felt hesitant. While the man's treatment and recovery appeared complete, his unkempt appearance and unstable living conditions raised concerns. "Do you have any family members, any friends that could help you follow through with your treatment?" asked the doctor. "Not really," the patient responded, until a recollection surfaced: "Actually, I do have a friend who takes care of me sometimes. His name is Tom Monson."*<sup>2</sup>

President Thomas Spencer Monson was "a special friend of the underdog" and of "the down-and-outers," as one longtime friend put it.<sup>3</sup> During his entire life, including more than three decades of intense responsibilities as a member of the First Presidency, he made personal visits to elderly friends and strangers an enormous priority and, when prompted by the Spirit, even took time out of important meetings to offer priesthood blessings to sick children. When he attended professional sporting events, instead of inviting prominent associates or public officials to attend with him, he brought friends from his growing-up years in a humble neighborhood. He attended every West High School reunion wearing his "Tom Monson" name badge. This same Thomas Monson, according to one of his sons, was "completely non-discriminatory as to an individual's public status, persona, or other distinguishing accomplishments: a humble friend from 50 years previous would receive the same—or more—attention as a governor, senator, or prominent businessman."<sup>4</sup>

People of high station and low, along with millions of

friends and followers both in and out of the Church, lost a loyal friend with the passing of the 16th President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Maintaining that "I have always needed the help of the Lord, and I have always asked for it,"<sup>5</sup> President Monson left behind an administration marked by an outreach to the world at large through humanitarian aid, Church web pages that created greater transparency and helped members understand complex issues, public relations campaigns aimed at helping the world understand the Church, and a flurry of innovations aimed at furthering the work of salvation. Among these were lowering the age at which young men and young women could serve full-time missions, an expansion of the ways that missionaries could reach out to others (including the use of technology), and online forums bringing Church leaders and members worldwide together in virtual face-to-face discussions. During his tenure a new Church handbook was produced that emphasized Christian discipleship. Family history work was simplified, making it easier to research and submit names to the temple for proxy baptisms and other ordinances of salvation.

Despite his many significant accomplishments, few would dispute that President Monson's most important legacy consists of his powerful personal example. One of his favorite scriptures, found in Acts 10:38, describes Jesus of Nazareth as someone "who went about doing good." President Monson could always be found doing good in ways the Savior exhorted us to: giving food to the hungry, taking in the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and entering the prisons of loneliness and despair that often engage the desolate (see Matthew 25:34–40). His humanitarianism, emphasis on people over programs, and dedication to following the Spirit led one reporter who covered President Monson for decades to write, "I have met few people who make such great effort to lift and bring comfort, consolation and cheer to others."<sup>6</sup> A lifetime filled with family, hardship, opportunity, and, of course, service helped create Thomas S. Monson's exemplary Christlike legacy of personal ministry.



*President Monson congratulates his friend Thelma Fetzer as she celebrates her 100th birthday in 2010. President Monson often visited elderly friends and strangers.*







### A Generous Home

On the corner of 500 South and 200 West, not far from the railroad tracks running through Salt Lake City, George Spencer and Gladys Condie Monson raised a family through the Great Depression surrounded by Gladys's relatives, descendants of pioneers from Scotland. George's grandparents had joined the Church in Sweden and England before emigrating to America and settling in Salt Lake City. On August 21, 1927, the first son and second child of George and Gladys was born, Thomas Spencer Monson, named after his maternal grandfather, Thomas Sharp Condie, and his father.

Surrounded by family, the Monsons extended their love to many others as well. Visits from hungry transients passing through town were not uncommon in the neighborhood, and Gladys Monson received and fed them "as though each had been an invited guest," President Monson later recalled.<sup>7</sup> She also sent weekly Sunday dinners to "Old Bob" down the street, who regularly offered Tom a dime for the delivery. "I can't accept the money," Tom thoughtfully replied. "My mother would tan my hide."<sup>8</sup> On Sundays, Tom's father would sometimes carry Uncle Elias, his brother crippled from arthritis, to his 1928 Oldsmobile, with Tom in tow, and drive him around the city.

"During this period of my life I was much impressed by the actions of my mother and father," President Monson observed. "It didn't dawn on me that they rarely attended church."<sup>9</sup> He also recalled an ambience of tolerance and goodwill: "I never heard my father speak a negative word toward another person. In fact, he would not remain in the



*Thomas and his siblings were impressed by their parents' kindness (above left). President Monson showed similar kindness as counselor in a stake presidency (center).*





room if anyone were speaking disrespectfully or negatively toward another person.”<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, these attitudes and actions started rubbing off on Tom. Overjoyed one Christmas to receive an electric train set, he nevertheless begged his mother for—and received—an additional car



*Lessons learned as a youth (above) and in his Sunday School class (below) guided his life, even though his old ward building (left) exists no more.*

from a less-impressive train set meant as a gift for a widow’s son down the street. Later, when Tom and his mother delivered the gift and Tom saw the boy’s exuberance over the meager train set, pangs of guilt set in. He ran back home to retrieve not only the car he had taken from the set but also one of his own.<sup>11</sup> Tom later offered his two pet rabbits for Christmas dinner to a friend’s family who had never tasted turkey or chicken.<sup>12</sup> And when a woman took issue with Tom and his buddies hitting baseballs into her yard during their neighborhood games (she often snatched the baseballs and kept them), Tom decided to defuse the situation. Without a word passing between them, he regularly





***After military service, Thomas met, then married, Frances Johnson. They had three children: Thomas Lee, Clark Spencer, and Ann Frances.***

watered her yard in the summer and raked leaves from her lawn in the fall. Then one day she invited him in for milk and cookies—and handed over a boxful of baseballs.<sup>13</sup>

Still, President Monson frequently acknowledged that his boyhood good deeds coexisted with a mischievous streak that sometimes led to a scolding. He and a cousin once collected neighbors' stray dogs and put them into a backyard coal shed, six of which overran Tom's father when he went to open the door.<sup>14</sup> One afternoon a Primary president pulled Tom aside and said she was saddened by the rowdy behavior of many of the boys in Primary opening exercises. Tom offered to help. "The Primary's disciplinary problems," he recalled, "ceased that moment."<sup>15</sup> Still, temptations persisted. He once convinced a friend to skip out on an afternoon Primary class with him. They would make their escape right after Tom took a penny from his pocket and dropped it in the donation box for Primary Children's Hospital. They would then use a dime he had in his pocket to go to Hatch Dairy for Fudgsicles. The plan went awry, however, when the boys discovered Tom had inadvertently donated the dime instead of the penny. So

both returned, where Tom dejectedly donated the penny as well. "For a long while," he later said, "I felt that I, perhaps, had the most substantial investment in the Primary Children's Hospital."<sup>16</sup>

Frequent visits to a family cabin in Provo Canyon initiated a lifelong love of duck hunting, camping, fishing, and swimming in the river; once Tom even rescued a girl swept into dangerous whirlpools.<sup>17</sup> He told of one experience when he and a friend unwisely set fire to some weeds near the family cabin. As always, he used the story as a framework to share an important gospel principle.<sup>18</sup>

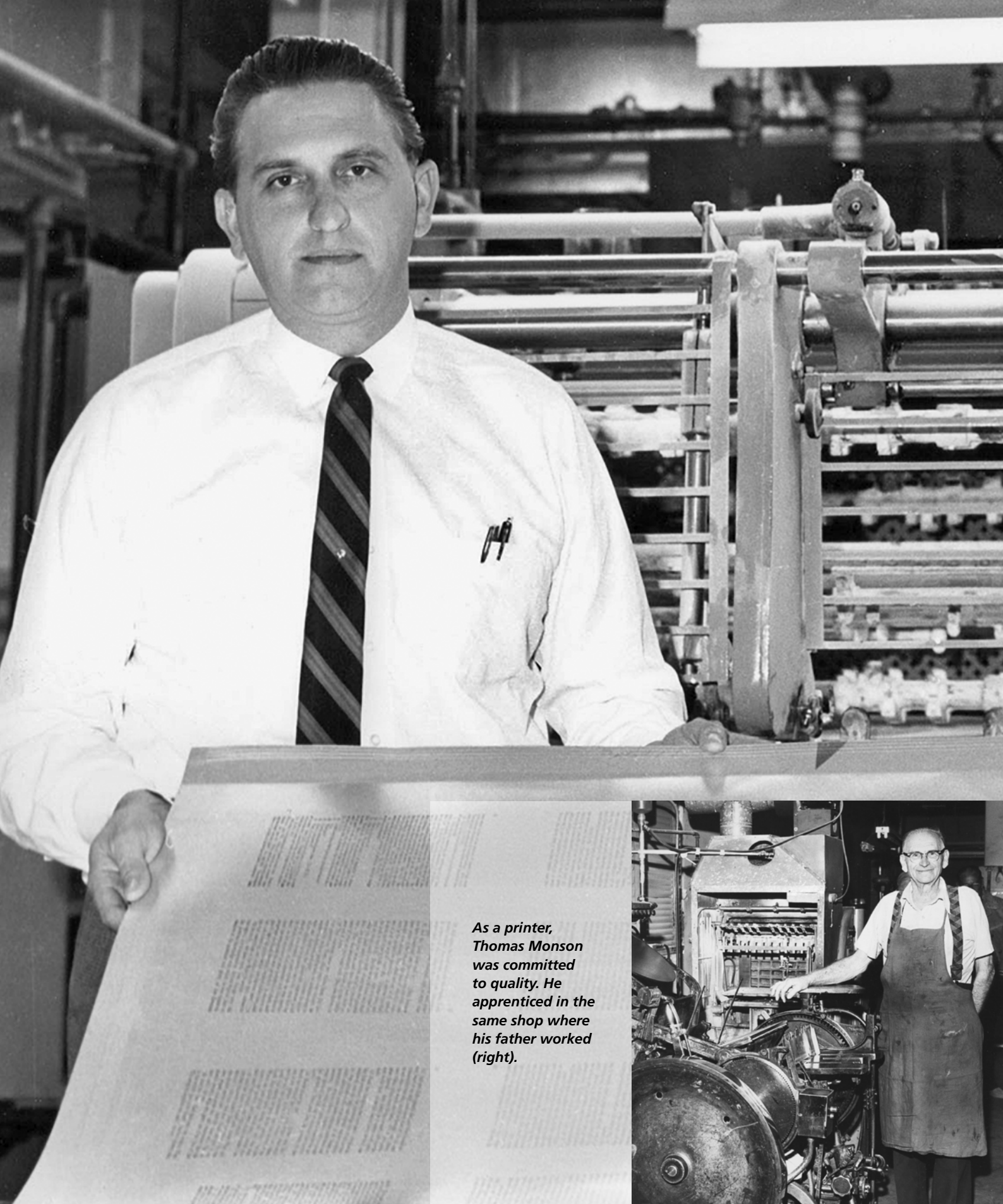
Visits several times a week down the street from his Salt Lake City home to the Chapman public library initiated a love of books and writers, which later enabled him to quote at length from favorite poets such as Wordsworth, Longfellow, Bryant, Tennyson, and Shakespeare.<sup>19</sup>

One particular interest, raising pigeons, which was developed in youth and continued through adulthood, taught young Tom a lesson in stewardship when an Aaronic Priesthood quorum adviser gave him a pigeon that continually returned to the adviser's home, thus creating a weekly priesthood interview opportunity with the boy.<sup>20</sup> However, it was a beloved Sunday School teacher, Lucy Gertsch, whom Tom credited with giving him a foundation for his testimony of Jesus Christ. Her love for a class with rowdy boys transformed their unruly behavior as they listened to Sister Gertsch's Spirit-filled lessons on the Bible.<sup>21</sup>

## **Growing to Manhood**

The economic constraints of the Great Depression forced Tom at age 12 to begin working for his father, who managed a printing company.<sup>22</sup> The shadow of World War II, however, loomed larger than even the Depression as Tom made his way through high school. "Each young man knew that if [the war] continued, he would be in the military," President Monson said of his teenage years.<sup>23</sup> An excellent student with a love of history, he enrolled at the University of Utah at age 17.<sup>24</sup> He seriously considered becoming a history teacher but instead pursued a business





*As a printer, Thomas Monson was committed to quality. He apprenticed in the same shop where his father worked (right).*

degree, while also enjoying institute of religion classes taught by Dr. Lowell Bennion and Dr. T. Edgar Lyon.<sup>25</sup>

While at the university he met the love of his life. After being introduced to Frances Johnson at a Hello Day dance, Tom subsequently called on her. He later reflected that “I was not prepared for the dignity and quiet which prevailed [in her home],” comparing his more boisterous home with that of the Johnsons.<sup>26</sup> Frances’s father noticed the Monson name and, with tears in his eyes, hugged Tom after the two realized that Tom’s great-uncle Elias had introduced the Johnson family to the gospel in Sweden.<sup>27</sup> Both Tom and Frances loved big bands and frequented dances with band leaders such as Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller.<sup>28</sup>

In 1945, Tom joined the U.S. Naval Reserve. During the first three weeks of boot camp, he later jokingly said, “I was convinced my life was in jeopardy. The navy wasn’t trying to train me; it was trying to kill me.” But spiritual experiences accompanied the hard times. After a chief petty officer lined up everybody one Sunday and directed the Catholics, Jews, and Protestants to their meeting places, he approached Tom and asked, “And just what do you guys call yourselves?”

“Until that very moment,” President Monson later recalled, “I had not realized that anyone was standing beside me or behind me on the drill ground. Almost in unison, each of us replied, ‘Mormons!’”<sup>29</sup>

One night just before Christmas, Tom’s LDS friend Leland Merrill, who was in the adjoining barracks’ bunk, began groaning in pain. In desperation, he whispered, “Monson, Monson, aren’t you an elder?” and asked for a priesthood blessing—which Tom had never before performed. Praying

quietly for help, Tom received an answer: “Look in the bottom of the sea bag,” where at 2:00 a.m. he found a missionary handbook, which gave instructions on how to bless the sick. “With about 60 curious sailors looking on, I proceeded with the blessing,” he later said. “Before I could stow my gear, Leland Merrill was sleeping like a child.”<sup>30</sup> Tom also learned from others during military service and admired a

young Catholic man who knelt to pray every night when “we Mormon boys would pray while lying on our bunks.”<sup>31</sup>

Tom served for a year and returned home to graduate with honors from the University of Utah, going on to work as an advertising executive for the Church-owned *Deseret News*. Several months after graduating, he married Frances Johnson in the Salt Lake Temple on October 7, 1948. “I learned quite early to stand on my own feet,” Sister Monson said of their early years together.<sup>32</sup> Almost immediately, the Lord asked

young Brother and Sister Monson to begin their tireless participation in building the kingdom of God.

### A Personal Ministry

In May 1950, Tom and Frances’s bishop, John R. Burt, was called to the stake presidency. Asked who should serve as bishop in his stead, Bishop Burt paused for several minutes: “I was trying to figure out how to explain to [the stake president] why I thought a 22-year-old kid should replace me as bishop.”<sup>33</sup> Thus began young Thomas S. Monson’s ministry over the Temple View Sixth-Seventh Ward, with its 85 widows and the largest demand for welfare services in the Church at the time. Serving as bishop in this particular ward reinforced and intensified Tom’s already strong



***After dedicating Haiti for the preaching of the gospel in 1983, Elder Monson visited the site where a chapel was built.***



charitable instincts. He visited every widow at Christmastime, bringing gifts of candy, books, or roasting chickens.<sup>34</sup> He grew so close to “his widows” that he made yearly visits to many of them long after being released as bishop, even managing to speak at all 85 funerals during his tenure as a General



**Leaders gathered for a photo with Elder Monson following a priesthood meeting in the newly established Dresden Mission in East Germany.**

Authority.<sup>35</sup> “My inadequacy humbled me,” he recalled of the five years he served as bishop; but he was grateful that “I developed very young in life a spirit of compassion for others who might be in need, regardless of age or circumstance.”<sup>36</sup> He ministered to everyone in his ward boundaries, including those of other faiths, and sought out less-active members even when it meant going to a gas station one Sunday morning where he encouraged a young man working in a grease pit to return to his quorum meetings.<sup>37</sup>

This particular calling also imparted a difficult lesson. While attending a stake

leadership meeting, Bishop Monson felt a strong prompting to leave at once to visit an older ward member being treated at the veterans’ hospital. Unfortunately, the stake president was speaking, so the young bishop impatiently waited until he finished before rushing to the hospital. As he ran to the man’s room, a nurse stopped him. She asked, “Are you Bishop Monson?” and proceeded to tell him that “the patient was asking for you just before he died.”<sup>38</sup> Bishop Monson drove home that night vowing to never again fail to act on a prompting from the Holy Ghost, a commitment reflected over and over again in the remainder of his Church service.

He went on to serve as a counselor in the stake presidency at age 27 and as a mission president in Canada in 1959, at age 31. Missionaries under his guidance remember a leader so in tune with the Spirit that he often followed impressions to visit a missionary’s apartment just before the missionary was about to do something wrong.<sup>39</sup> He focused on the missionaries by learning all of their names, counseling with them about their problems and concerns, and essentially doing everything he could to prevent early departures and disciplinary councils. By this time, the Monson family had grown to include two young children, Thomas Lee and Ann Frances. A third child, Clark Spencer, was born in Canada. The family enjoyed more time together on this mission assignment than they were accustomed to, and Tom developed a loyalty to Canada still apparent in 2010, when, as President of the Church, he dedicated the Canada Vancouver Temple with a Canadian flag on his lapel and changed the opening song to “O Canada.”<sup>40</sup>



***Called to preach the gospel “in all the world” (D&C 107:23), Elder Monson traveled to Germany (above) and the South Pacific (below).***







**President Monson served as a counselor to three Church Presidents, including Presidents Gordon B. Hinckley and Ezra Taft Benson. At age 10, he gave his first talk at this pulpit (above right). Since 2008 his counselors in the First Presidency were Henry B. Eyring and Dieter F. Uchtdorf.**



Upon returning home to Salt Lake City, Tom became general manager of the Deseret Press, and Frances busied herself with raising children, serving in ward callings, and supporting her husband as he served on various general Church priesthood committees.

Tom's extensive involvement in Church committees such as Adult Correlation, Missionary, or Genealogy, in fact, led him to believe that an invitation to President David O. McKay's office would somehow be related to his current assignment. It was not. President McKay extended the call to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, replacing Elder N. Eldon Tanner, who had been called as a counselor in the First Presidency. Tom felt so overwhelmed and surprised he couldn't speak. Finally, he assured President McKay that "any talent with which I might have been blessed would be extended in the service of the Master in putting my very life on the line if necessary."<sup>41</sup>

President Monson agreed to keep the sacred call confidential to everyone except his wife, and did not sleep at all the night before general conference on October 4, 1963. Upon arriving at conference, he sat among the members


of the Priesthood Home Teaching committee on which he served. A friend next to him, Hugh Smith, told him of a strange coincidence: the last two times a General Authority had been called, that man had been sitting next to Hugh.<sup>42</sup> After Thomas Monson's name was called, "Hugh Smith looked at me and said simply, 'Lightning has struck for the third time.' I believe the walk from the audience to the stand was the longest walk of my life."<sup>43</sup>

### **Service as a Member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles**

Thomas S. Monson, at age 36, became the youngest man called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles since 1910, when Joseph Fielding Smith joined the Quorum at age 33. His service with the Twelve spanned 22 years, from 1963 until his call to the First Presidency under President Ezra Taft Benson in 1985, and included service on every major committee of the Church, frequently as the chair.<sup>44</sup> During this time, Church membership evolved from a homogeneous group centered in the western United States into a worldwide, highly diverse global community.<sup>45</sup> He was called to the apostleship by President David O. McKay but went on to serve under President Joseph Fielding Smith from 1970 to 1972 and then under Harold B. Lee from 1972 to 1973. It was during President Spencer W. Kimball's tenure, from 1973 to 1985, that President Monson led a scripture publications committee that in 1979 produced a 2,400-page edition of the King James Version of the Bible that included a Topical Guide, Bible Dictionary, and pioneering footnote system. President Monson also participated with President Kimball in the landmark revelation that all worthy male members would receive the priesthood.<sup>46</sup>

But to members confined behind the Iron Curtain throughout the post-World War II years, President Monson's greatest accomplishment as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles was his overseeing of the Eastern European Saints. "The actual blessings he brought to our country and to Europe," observed German First Presidency member Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "are so real and so



A photograph of President Russell M. Monson, an older man with thinning hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is leaning forward and shaking hands with a young boy with short brown hair, who is wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers. They are standing in front of a wooden podium decorated with pink flowers. In the background, a blurred crowd of people is visible, including a person in a graduation cap. The scene appears to be at a formal event, likely a general conference.

*President Monson often paused to greet members after sessions of general conference.*





***Above: A girl joined President Monson in applying mortar to a temple cornerstone. Below: At his alma mater, he received a game ball.***



significant and so singular in their value that I really believe that the Lord had prepared him to be an instrument in changing the history of Germany.”<sup>47</sup> The Communist government of the German Democratic Republic severely repressed religious observance, yet Church members continued faithful despite discrimination, loss of job and educational opportunities, and frequent surveillance as they met together. President Monson visited them frequently, once studying the entire Church handbook with the intent of retyping the entire book after crossing into East Germany because Church materials were not allowed to be taken into the country. He went to a branch office and started this task, and after several pages he glanced around and discovered a copy of the handbook on a shelf behind him.<sup>48</sup> He worked tirelessly with East German officials to allow at least a few Saints to attend general conference and to visit the temple outside the country, but still East German Saints yearned for opportunities akin to those of other members around the world.

Then, in 1978, President Kimball promised President Monson that “the Lord will not deny temple blessings to those worthy [East German] members” and added with a smile, “You find the way.”<sup>49</sup> As President Monson and East German Church leader Henry Burkhardt continued to petition the government for permission for six couples at a time to visit the Swiss Temple, they received an astounding suggestion from government leaders: “Why don’t you build a temple here?” In October 1982, the First Presidency announced that a temple would be built in Freiberg, German Democratic Republic, the first temple ever constructed in a Communist

country. This announcement was almost as inconceivable as the miraculous agreement President Monson, then-Elder Russell M. Nelson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and East German Church leaders later made with government officials and head of state Erich Honecker to allow mis-



***Youth with special needs were thrilled at a cultural celebration in Laie, Hawaii, when President Monson took a moment to greet them individually.***

sionaries to enter and leave the country before the collapse of the Berlin Wall.<sup>50</sup> “I am a living witness,” wrote President Monson, “of how the hand of the Lord has been made manifest in watching over the members of the Church in what once were Communist-ruled countries.”<sup>51</sup>

Yet, amidst world-changing events and overwhelming administrative duties, President Monson’s ministry continued to focus on the promptings of the Holy Ghost and on reaching out to the one. After offering a blessing to a friend in a veterans’ hospital, President Monson felt he had “accomplished more good

in that visit than in a week of meetings at Church headquarters.”<sup>52</sup> Stories abound of detours taken from General Authority duties as President Monson retreated to hospital rooms, nursing homes, and solitary bedsides to visit the sick and the lonely waiting for him. When stake meeting schedules in Shreveport, Louisiana, wouldn’t allow President Monson time to visit a terminally ill girl who had asked for a blessing from him, he was nevertheless prepared when, during the Saturday evening leadership session, “I heard a voice speak to my spirit,” he said. “The message was brief, the words familiar: ‘Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God’ (Mark 10:14).”<sup>53</sup> He made the 80-mile (129 km) trip to Christal Methvin’s home the next morning, blessing her in a Spirit-filled family gathering before she died four days later.

When meeting with impoverished East German members, President Monson would give away his suits, shoes, calculator, and even a set of marked scriptures.<sup>54</sup> And he never forgot his fellow members from the Sixth-Seventh Ward, watching out for aging and low-income friends like Ed Erickson, whom President Monson invited to family gatherings and initiated birthday celebrations for. In a 2009 talk, he taught: “Have the courage to refrain from judging and criticizing those around you, as well as the courage to make certain everyone is included and feels loved and valued.”<sup>55</sup>

President Monson’s honesty and friendliness engendered bridge-building and goodwill for the Church among various religions, civic organizations, and community leaders. He had grown up in a diverse neighborhood, felt close to relatives of different faiths, and genuinely

professed, “I think there are good people everywhere.”<sup>56</sup> He mingled readily with others, “many of whom are not necessarily members of the Church,” he observed, “but are community spirited and civic minded individuals.”<sup>57</sup> Community leaders like one former publisher of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, a Catholic, voiced their appreciation: “If he’s ever met you, Tom Monson is your friend. . . . The Church



**President Monson, with his wife, Frances, waves from his place as grand marshal in the 2005 Days of ‘47 parade in Salt Lake City, Utah.**

gave this community special unification through friendship when it elevated Tom Monson to the First Presidency.”<sup>58</sup> A Salt Lake community advocate once observed, “I don’t know if people know how much the LDS Church gets involved with the nonprofit world. President Monson is very aware of what the needs are.”<sup>59</sup> Another faith leader wrote to President Monson: “You always open your heart to meet the needs and requests of the Salvation Army. Certainly you and your associates have overwhelmed us with your warmth and gra-

cious spirits.”<sup>60</sup> He attended and spoke at activities held in conjunction with the 1993 dedication services of the restored Cathedral of the Madeleine in Salt Lake City and also spoke at Catholic funerals for close friends.<sup>61</sup>

Hobbies like pigeon-raising offered respite from the pressures of President Monson’s duties and inspired his great-grandchildren to call him “Grandpa Birdie.” His passion for raising pigeons was reflected in a merit badge on pigeon-raising offered by the Boy Scouts of America for a time. His service on the Scouts’ National Executive Board began in 1969 and continued through the years as he received the Silver Beaver Award, the Silver Buffalo Award, and international Scouting’s highest award, the Bronze Wolf, in 1993. However, one former chief Scout executive,





***At Boy Scout jamborees and other gatherings, President Monson mingled with young men to remind them of their heritage and responsibilities.***

Roy Williams, joked that President Monson couldn't quite get over the Scouts' decision to abandon a pigeon-raising merit badge.<sup>62</sup>

President Monson's interests ranged broadly. While a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he earned a master's degree in business administration, and throughout his travels he liked to visit military cemeteries—hallowed places that evoke, he said, thoughts of “shattered dreams, unfulfilled hopes, grief-filled hearts and lives cut short by the sharp scythe of war.”<sup>63</sup> He loved to study about World War II and, on a lighter note, relished *Perry Mason* reruns on television at night, though he sometimes fell asleep and missed the ending.<sup>64</sup> He was fond, too, of musicals. “I am what my wife, Frances, calls a ‘show-a-holic,’” he once told a general conference audience.<sup>65</sup> He also enjoyed his share of New Year's Day football games in which “I can start out neutral watching two football teams, but within minutes I have selected the team which I think ought to win.”<sup>66</sup> He could talk about chickens for an entire flight with a seatmate and, at a Boy Scouts of America prayer breakfast at the White House in 1989, found a shared love of English springer spaniels with United States president George Bush.<sup>67</sup>

His deepest interest, of course, was his



***For his decades of service to the Boy Scouts of America, President Monson was given Scouting's highest award and had a Scout building named after him.***







*Filipino members  
enjoy hear-  
ing President  
Monson play the  
piano at the Cebu  
City Philippines  
Temple corner-  
stone ceremony.*

family, which grew to include 8 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. While his time at home was limited, his children remember playing games, fishing, duck hunting, weeding gardens, going to movies, swimming, and sleigh riding with their father.<sup>68</sup> Two particular memories stand out for son Tom: playing checkers as a young boy with his father and having his father fly to Louisville, Kentucky, to give him a blessing because he had contracted pneumonia during military basic training.<sup>69</sup> Daughter Ann enjoyed the Sunday evening reports her father shared with the family after returning from Church assignments. And Clark especially cherished the day his father drove 40 miles (64 km) out of his way so that he and Clark could examine a hawk's nest near Randolph, Utah.<sup>70</sup> President Monson relished mowing the lawn and participating in family Ping-Pong tournaments in the basement of their home.<sup>71</sup>

### **Member of the First Presidency**

Thomas S. Monson served for 22 years in the First Presidency, starting in 1985 as Second Counselor to President Ezra Taft Benson and then continuing in that role with President Howard W. Hunter in 1994. Thirteen of those years, from 1995 to 2008, were at the side of President Gordon B. Hinckley, who called President Monson to be his First Counselor.<sup>72</sup> President Monson's tenure in the First Presidency drew on his varied background in Church administration and left him with a heavy workload that made it difficult to leave the office. President Hinckley became the most traveled President in Church history, and this particular administration kept extremely



busy. Smaller temples enabled the pace of temple building to rapidly increase; an enormous new Church Conference Center was constructed to enable thousands of members to attend general conference and other functions; worldwide training meetings via satellite broadcast began; and a Day of Celebration in Rice-Eccles Stadium at the University of Utah commemorated the 200th birthday of the Prophet Joseph Smith, with 42,000 youth from Salt Lake Valley and Wyoming performing.<sup>73</sup>

As always, though, in the words of Elder Ronald A. Rasband of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, President Monson was “never too busy for people,”<sup>74</sup> and in the winter of 2000, one person he took time out for was his wife. After she suffered a severe fall, he spent several weeks taking his paperwork to her hospital room until, finally, Frances became alert enough to voice her first words: “I forgot to mail the quarterly tax payment.”<sup>75</sup>

Another recipient of his kindness was *Church News* reporter Gerry Avant, who frequently covered President Monson’s travels and was once invited to some sightseeing with the Monsons because, as President Monson told her, “you’ve been working hard.”<sup>76</sup>

## President of the Church

President Gordon B. Hinckley died on January 27, 2008. The First Presidency was dissolved and President Monson returned to his position as President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The man who grew up near the railroad tracks, instigated mischievous childhood antics in Primary, and willingly shared his meager belongings even during the Great Depression would soon become the leader of

millions of Latter-day Saints worldwide. “I’ve never speculated on what might lie down the road for anything in my life,” he said in an interview shortly before he was to be sustained as President of the Church in a solemn assembly during the April 2008 general conference. “I didn’t know but what President Hinckley would outlive me.” He said, “I’ve always followed the philosophy, ‘Serve where you’re

called, not where you’ve been or where you might be. Serve where you’re called.’”<sup>77</sup>

Thomas S. Monson was set apart and ordained as the 16th President of the Church on February 3, 2008, choosing President Henry B. Eyring to serve as his First Counselor. For his Second Counselor, he chose President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, a multilingual German convert to the Church and a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles since 2004. The new First Presidency symbolized the global nature of the expanding Church.<sup>78</sup> At

a press conference on February 4, 2008, President Monson told reporters, “As a Church we reach out not only to our own people, but also to those people of goodwill throughout the world in that spirit of brotherhood which comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>79</sup>

This spirit of brotherhood and reaching out to others became hallmarks of President Monson’s administration. Church leaders worked regularly with Catholics, Evangelical Christians, and other religious and community groups in humanitarian work and supporting moral causes. Church leaders invited other faith leaders to speak at LDS campuses and bolstered support for religious freedom with online resources.<sup>80</sup> President Monson and members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles also encouraged Church



**President Monson pauses for a photo during intermission at a Mormon Tabernacle Choir concert near Denver, Colorado, USA.**

members to reach out to other faiths in service and community building and enhanced already existing humanitarian connections with other institutions to relieve the staggering needs of people affected by natural and man-made disasters worldwide. During the first seven years of President Monson's tenure,



***After the new First Presidency was announced in February 2008, President Monson and his counselors spoke to the press.***

the Church contributed to relief efforts in the aftermath of earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal, a Japanese tsunami, and floods in Thailand. It also offered help in immunizing people in underdeveloped countries, providing clean water to remote villages, easing food crises internationally, and offering disaster relief in the United States. This global aid and influence was noted by Slate.com, which in 2009 ranked President Monson first in a list of the 80 most powerful octogenarians in America.<sup>81</sup>

Also under President Monson's leadership, Church public relations began an outreach to help others better understand the diversity

of Latter-day Saints. The "I'm a Mormon" campaign featured Latter-day Saints who worked for such diverse organizations as Harley Davidson, the Library of Congress, and rock bands. Church headquarters also launched websites for youth and others, and the Church-owned BYUtv channel and website began producing critically acclaimed programs to appeal to a wider audience. On the Church's website, a series of high-quality videos began appearing, showing scenes from the New Testament that could be appreciated by people of many faiths. Other online resources included the publication of several Gospel Topics essays, designed to address complex issues in a straightforward and scholarly manner, and the website Mormon and Gay, providing relevant Church teachings and featuring personal stories from gay Latter-day Saints and their families.

Perhaps the most substantial changes that transpired during President Monson's tenure, however, took place in historic administrative developments. Significant changes impacted the way the Church leads, functions, teaches, and proselytes. In 2009 the Church distributed a DVD and pamphlet on welfare principles and in 2010 released a new handbook of instructions for Church leaders, accompanied by two worldwide training broadcasts. The new handbook stressed working in councils through open and honest discussions, alleviating the load of the bishop through delegation, and, most important, helping Church members become true disciples of Jesus Christ. Also in 2010, international training by members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles began implementing priesthood leadership conferences and area reviews that included a

***At civic events, Church events, and in reaching out to other faiths, President Monson offered a ready smile and a spirit of support.***





comprehensive overview of humanitarian service, welfare needs, missionary work, and temple work.

One of the most dramatic developments to occur under President Monson's direction was announced in the October 2012 general conference when President Monson declared that men could begin serving full-time missions at age 18 and women at 19. This unprecedented policy change lowering age requirements Churchwide generated an eagerness for missionary work that resulted in historically high numbers of men and especially women serving full-time missions. The creation of new missionary training centers and new missions accompanied the rising number of missionaries, which reached 85,000 at the end of 2014. Members became part of the "hastening of the work" (see D&C 88:73) as well, better preparing sons and daughters for missions within the home and participating more fully in their local missionary programs. Technology and online proselyting, as well as the creation of "sister training leaders"—a leadership role for sister missionaries—also added to the exhilarating sense of progress and innovation that the mission-age-change announcement created.

Enabling young women to serve missions at younger ages dovetailed with an ongoing effort during President Monson's tenure to better involve women in leadership roles, decision making, and ward and stake council participation. To better help Latter-day Saint women and men appreciate the crucial role sisters have played in the gospel in every dispensation—especially during the Savior's ministry and during the Restoration period from 1830 to the present—the Church published *Daughters in My Kingdom* and encouraged its use in the home, in Relief Society and Young Women, and

in quorums. In 2014 the general women's session of general conference replaced the general Relief Society and Young Women meetings, with all females ages 8 and older invited to attend this twice-a-year meeting.

Better and more interactive teaching methods, especially in helping youth become full participants in the gospel, also became a priority of President Monson's administrative

innovations. The 2013 implementation of *Come, Follow Me*, a youth curriculum designed to "bless the youth in their efforts to become fully converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ,"<sup>82</sup> offered teachers and youth alike better ways to teach as Jesus Christ did. It used online resources, youth participation, and Spirit-inspired discussions in building faith and gospel understanding. Similar efforts to improve all teaching in the Church came in 2016 with the new resource *Teaching in the Savior's Way*



**President and Sister Monson celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in 2008.**

and the introduction of monthly teacher council meetings in wards and branches.

Also during President Monson's administration, announcements of new temples to be built throughout the world continued. Temple dedications and rededications saw President Monson traveling to locales around the globe, including Cebu City, Philippines; Curitiba, Brazil; Kyiv, Ukraine; Panama City, Panama; and Kansas City, Missouri. In 2013 the introduction of online resources to help members find their ancestors resulted in an 11 percent increase in family names submitted by members for temple ordinances in what was called "a banner year for family history."<sup>83</sup>

Despite the heavy demands on his time, however, President Monson remained Thomas Monson, the Church leader who, in the words of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the

Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “will show up, probably unannounced, at the funeral of a rank-and-file employee. I can’t think of anything that exemplifies more the ministry of President Monson than that kind of individualized attention.”<sup>84</sup>

On May 23, 2013, he presided at the funeral of his own beloved wife, Frances, after she passed away on May 17 in a Salt Lake hospital. “She has been supportive from the day we married,” said President Monson at the services, calling her “the ideal wife and mother.”<sup>85</sup> He fulfilled the remainder of his presidency as a widower, often accompanied to special events by his daughter, Ann.

During President Monson’s tenure, improved Sabbath day observance was emphasized as a means of increasing faith in Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. Beginning in 2015, a coordinated and sustained effort at all levels of the Church and in the home urged members to “make the Sabbath a delight” (see Isaiah 58:13) by focusing on the Lord and their covenants with Him in order to reap the blessings promised to the faithful.

President Monson also continued to remain aware of those estranged from the Church and never treated them as unfit for the kingdom. When an older man who had not been involved in the Church for 20 years came to a General Authority for advice on coming back, he pulled out the letter that had motivated his own desire to return: “You have been long enough away, and it is time to come back. Tom.”<sup>86</sup> According to President Monson, “I find there is a little bit of sainthood in everybody, and I look for it.”<sup>87</sup>

Even as President of the Church, he maintained his sense of comradeship with others, said Elder L. Tom Perry (1922–2015) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: “He’ll

talk about the BYU game or the Jazz [basketball team]; he’s a great sports fan. And then he’ll get down to business.”<sup>88</sup> And he always maintained his sense of humor. At a 2009 gathering with the members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, he sat down at the gigantic organ and offered up his rendition of “To a Birthday Party” from a beginner’s piano book.<sup>89</sup> In 2013 the Church celebrated its “100 Years of

Scouting” with a program that also paid homage to President Monson’s lifelong support of Scouting—just one of many interests that kept him connected to his fellow beings, whom he loved to comfort and make happier, inviting all Scouters, regardless of religious affiliation, to participate.

“Feeling the nudge of the Lord, the promptings,” President Monson said in a 1997 interview, brought him the most joy, especially in situations like the one in which he had visited his father in the hospital and, rushing

afterward to get to his next meeting, felt he should nevertheless wait near the elevator. A family asked him to offer a blessing to their mother, who was struggling between life and death, and he agreed. Later that day he received word that each family member had kissed the mother and said a peaceful good-bye after the blessing and before she died.<sup>90</sup>

“I’ve had that happen to me all through my life to the extent that I try to keep the antennae up,” President Monson observed. And countless individuals—some of whose stories have been told, but many more whose encounters with Thomas Monson remain unknown—can attest to this remarkable man’s connection with the divine. “You develop an appreciation that Heavenly Father knows who you are,” reflected President Monson. “He says, ‘Here, go do this for me.’ I always thank Him.”<sup>91</sup>



***President and Sister Monson and their daughter exit a general conference session.***



And his witness to the world was unfailing. “With all my heart and the fervency of my soul,” said President Monson, “I lift up my voice in testimony as a special witness and declare that God does live. Jesus is His Son, the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh. He is our Redeemer; He is our Mediator with the Father. He it

was who died on the cross to atone for our sins. He became the firstfruits of the Resurrection. Because He died, all shall live again. ‘Oh, sweet the joy this sentence gives: “I know that my Redeemer lives!”’ [*Hymns*, no. 136]. May the whole world know it and live by that knowledge.”<sup>92</sup> ■

## NOTES

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4. Tom Monson, son, email to Joshua Perkey, Church Magazines, Feb. 19, 2008.
5. In Heidi S. Swinton, *To the Rescue: The Biography of Thomas S. Monson* (2010), 518.
6. Gerry Avant, “President’s Heartfelt Efforts Universal,” *Deseret News*, Feb. 7, 2008, M6.
7. In “A Life Guided by Service,” 4.
8. In “Speaking from Experience,” *Deseret News*, Feb. 7, 2008, M4.
9. In Carrie A. Moore, “LDS Leader Has Fond Memories of Growing Up in the S.L. Area,” *Deseret News*, Feb. 5, 2008, M3.
10. In Gerry Avant, “On Lord’s Errand since His Boyhood,” *Church News*, Feb. 9, 2008, 5.
11. Much of the biographical information in this article is taken from Swinton, *To the Rescue*.
12. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 50–51.
13. See Heidi S. Swinton, “Baseballs and Service,” *Friend*, Sept. 2012, 2.
14. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 35.
15. In Jeffrey R. Holland, “President Thomas S. Monson: In the Footsteps of the Master,” supplement to the *Ensign* and *Liahona*, June 2008, 5.
16. In “In His Own Words,” *Deseret News*, general conference special supplement, Apr. 1, 2008, 7.
17. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 58.
18. See Thomas S. Monson, “Obedience Brings Blessings,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2013, 89–90.
19. See Moore, “LDS Leader Has Fond Memories,” M3; “A Life Guided by Service,” 5.
20. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 74–75.
21. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 63–65.
22. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 78.
23. In Moore, “LDS Leader Has Fond Memories,” M3.
24. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 79, 87.
25. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 89, 288.
26. In Moore, “LDS Leader Has Fond Memories,” M3.
27. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 90.
28. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 92.
29. Thomas S. Monson, “Dare to Stand Alone,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2011, 61.
30. In “Speaking from Experience,” M5.
31. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 99.
32. In Moore, “LDS Leader Has Fond Memories,” M3.
33. In “A Life Guided by Service,” 5.
34. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 144.
35. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 142.
36. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 132.
37. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 158–59.
38. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 135–36.
39. See Gary Bell, in “Recollecting,” *Deseret News*, Feb. 5, 2008, M3.
40. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 175–76.
41. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 216.
42. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 217–18.
43. In “In His Own Words,” 17.
44. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 252.
45. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 224.
46. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 530–32.
47. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 279.
48. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 293–94.
49. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 309.
50. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 309, 313, 333–34.
51. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 340.
52. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 405.
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56. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 464.
57. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 401.
58. John W. Gallivan, in Jeffrey R. Holland, “Man of Action, Man of Faith,” 15.
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66. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 452.
67. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 463–64, 453.
68. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 200.
69. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “Man of Action, Man of Faith,” 16–17.
70. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “Man of Action, Man of Faith,” 17.
71. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 265.
72. See Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 532–33.
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75. In Swinton, *To the Rescue*, 492.
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