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.

We 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.
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 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...
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
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!” 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...
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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.” 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
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!”

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!
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.
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. 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...
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
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.