



“GATHERED TOGETHER in My Name”

The Lord has appointed ward and branch councils to help us minister in love and unity.

By Jakob R. Jones

Not long ago I attended a family home evening with a family whom I love very much: a young husband and wife and their little daughter. As their bishop I had come to their home acting partly on a prompting from the Spirit and largely on a prompting from this young father’s concerned mother and sister, who were also present. The Lord had been working with this family to make big changes in their lives and bring them back to the blessings of the gospel and the Church. But something had happened that day.

For months this young father had been deeply concerned about providing for his family. His employment was expected to end soon, and he and his wife were in the midst of deciding whether to relocate their family to another state. That would mean significant changes for the family. Earlier that day this father learned that some greatly anticipated financial relief would not be coming; it was crushing news.

When I arrived at their apartment, I could see the deep discouragement in his face. The responsibility of providing for a family and the unwelcome news weighed heavily on the shoulders of this young father.

His wife had chosen a chapter of scripture for the lesson to address their concerns of feeling overwhelmed. The father read the entire chapter. You may recognize these words from Isaiah 55:

“Every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy . . . without money and without price. . . .





“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, . . . behold, there will I be in the midst of them” (D&C 6:32).

Those words from the Savior are not just good advice or mere words of comfort. For the young prophet Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, those words of the Savior set forth the doctrine and pattern for obtaining revelation and guidance and for making decisions in the kingdom of God.

The Lord was in the midst of that family council that night. They had invited His Spirit through prayer and scripture study. They were united in purpose. They were filled with love for one another. They brought their best ideas and experiences and laid them before each other and before the Lord and asked for His guidance. They made decisions in unity and then took action.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (verses 1, 8).

And then the family discussed what those verses meant to them. The Spirit of the Lord filled that little apartment as this family home evening evolved into a family council. This young father shared his fears and concerns and desires, and everyone shared their love and concern for each other. They talked about what to do, what options they had, what actions to take.

It was a very open discussion. There were some disagreements. I felt impressed to simply listen and observe. Finally, in unity the husband and wife determined they should make the decision together with the Lord through prayer. I then offered words of support and encouragement.

The Lord’s Pattern of Revelation

I can recall few times when I’ve recognized the Spirit of the Lord more strongly than in that little apartment that evening with that humble, struggling family. It was a fulfillment of the Lord’s promise given to His disciples long ago: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, as touching one thing, behold, there will I be in the midst of them—even so am I in the midst of you” (D&C 6:32).

The Church Is Governed through Councils

The Church handbook teaches the doctrine of councils:

“The Lord’s Church is governed through councils at the general, area, stake, and ward levels. These councils are fundamental to the order of the Church.

“Under the keys of priesthood leadership at each level, leaders counsel together for the benefit of individuals and families.”¹

At all levels of this Church, we strive to operate by those same principles the Savior taught to His disciples and to Oliver and Joseph—to come together in unity and council.

Each ward has a ward council that “includes the bishopric, ward clerk, ward executive secretary, high priests group leader, elders quorum president, ward mission leader, and presidents of the Relief Society, Young Men, Young Women, Primary, and Sunday School.”²

All the work done by this group of ward leaders is ultimately focused on helping “individuals build testimonies, receive saving ordinances, keep covenants, and become consecrated followers of Jesus Christ.”³

You may have heard the statement “There is safety in counsel.”⁴ Why? One of the reasons is the simple fact that no one of us is as smart as many of us together. Each of us brings a unique perspective and set of experiences and insights.

The Church handbook also teaches how ward council meetings can be most effective at including the unique perspectives of each member of the council: “During the meeting, the bishop explains each matter being considered, but he does not normally decide how to resolve the matter until he has heard the discussion. He encourages discussion without dominating it. He asks questions and may ask particular council members for their suggestions. He listens carefully before making a decision. These discussions should foster a spirit of inspiration.”⁵

Simply put, we bring our unique talents and abilities and perspectives. We plead with the Lord to be with us, to guide us with His Spirit, to make up the difference in what we lack, and to know the needs of the members we serve. We discuss the needs of families and individuals and strive to come to decisions in unity. Then we go to work and ask the Lord to bless the members of the ward.

Counseling Together in Ward Council

Eight months before I attended that home evening with that young family, the ward council was gathered on a Sunday morning. We opened with prayer and watched a video about helping individuals and families receive the blessings and ordinances of the gospel. I asked the council members if anyone had come to mind as we viewed the video. That led to a discussion of this family. We expressed our love for them. We talked about possible callings, how we could help the father work toward Melchizedek Priesthood ordination, and how we could help the

couple work toward receiving temple ordinances.

As the bishop I made some assignments. It seemed the discussion was nearly closed, but something did not feel quite right. It was the Young Women president who finally said, “I think we’re moving too fast. I kind of feel like we need to focus on the basics with them, like family home evening and scripture study and prayer.” Then that “not quite right” feeling went away. She spoke, not on behalf of the Young Women organization, but out of love for this family, and in that moment the Spirit bore witness to us of the truth of her counsel.

This sister’s comment reopened the discussion. We talked about how to help the family develop a pattern of scripture study, prayer, and home evening. The young father’s sister was serving as one of our ward missionaries, so the ward mission leader took the assignment to work with her and the home teachers to institute regular family home evenings. My wife and I delivered a copy of the *Family Home Evening* resource guidebook and a hymnbook to their home.

The most consistent support and strength came from the mother and sister of this young father as they consistently attended family home evening



“When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God” (Mosiah 2:17).

with the family, ultimately leading to that important family night that I was privileged to attend.

The handbook states: “Both men and women should feel that their comments are valued as full participants. . . . The viewpoint of women is sometimes different from that of men, and it adds essential perspective to understanding and responding to members’ needs.”⁶ As a young bishop I sit in council with Primary, Young Women, and Relief Society presidents who have much more wisdom and life experience and insight than I. They are often very much my teachers in Christlike character and even in how to be a good father and priesthood holder.

I am so grateful for the women of this Church. I hope our sisters never feel unheard or disregarded in our council meetings. Ward council members operate as equals. The keys of presidency given to a bishop are a matter of order, organization, and assigned responsibility but never a designation of dominance or spiritual superiority.

Unity

The handbook describes the importance of unity: “After open discussion, the bishop may make a decision, or he may wait to discuss the matter further with his counselors. After he makes a decision, council members should support it in a spirit of unity and harmony.

“If council members have strongly unsettled feelings about an important decision, the bishop may wait for another council meeting to consider the matter further and seek spiritual confirmation and unity.”⁷

Unity is another reason there is safety in councils. Sometimes as individuals we think we know what action needs to be taken, and we often want to jump right to the end result. We forget that the Lord’s end goal is not in our developing a plan of action. It is that each of His children comes to know Him. You remember how the Lord prayed for His disciples:

“And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. . . .

“I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. . . .

“ . . . Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. . . .

“I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one” (John 17:3, 9, 11, 23).

The Lord’s objective is that we become His—that we become one with Him, with our Heavenly Father, and with each other. The process is as important as the result. Councils are part of the divinely appointed process by which unity is achieved and by which we become Christ’s. The Lord has stated, “Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine” (D&C 38:27).

That commandment may also be used as a test. For example, the Lord might have conversely stated, “By this ye shall know that ye are mine, when ye are one with each other and one with me.”

The father of a family may receive revelation that



relocating the family will bring blessings and unity. But without the unity of his wife and children, his plan may not bring the expected results.

A bishop may receive revelation for a ward mission plan, but unless the ward council is united with that revelation, the blessings will not come, and the bishop will be left to wonder what went wrong.

Here is how President Russell M. Nelson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, described how the Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles operates:

“The calling of 15 men to the holy apostleship provides great protection for us as members of the Church. Why? Because decisions of these leaders must be unanimous. Can you imagine how the Spirit needs to move upon 15 men to bring about unanimity? These 15 men have varied educational and professional backgrounds, with differing opinions about many things. Trust me! These 15 men—prophets, seers, and revelators—know what the will of the Lord is when unanimity is reached!”⁸

I bear witness that the Lord is interested in the details of our individual lives. I am ever amazed at how far the Savior is willing to go, or to send one of His servants, to rescue one of His children. How grateful I am for the councils appointed with the responsibility to care for Heavenly Father’s children. ■

The author lives in California, USA.

To learn more about family councils, see Elder M. Russell Ballard’s April 2016 general conference address, “Family Councils.”

NOTES

1. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 4.1.
2. *Handbook 2*, 4.4.
3. *Handbook 2*, 4.4.
4. See Henry B. Eyring, “Listen Together” (Brigham Young University devotional, Sept. 4, 1988), 2, speeches.byu.edu.
5. *Handbook 2*, 4.6.1.
6. *Handbook 2*, 4.6.1.
7. *Handbook 2*, 4.6.1.
8. Russell M. Nelson, “Sustaining the Prophets,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2014, 75.



IF YOU’RE NOT SERVING ON THE WARD COUNCIL

- As a visiting teacher or home teacher, you can pray for those you visit. You care for them. When you report to your leaders on how your families are doing, you can pray that the information will make it to the ward council and that the members of the council will be guided by the Spirit to address the needs of those families.
- You may have a spouse whom you regularly send off to a ward council meeting. You may be tempted to complain of his or her absence, especially if you are left alone to get your children ready for church. You can pray that your spouse will be guided by the Spirit, that his or her service will bring some of our Heavenly Father’s children to Christ, and that your family will be blessed.
- When you receive a calling or an invitation to speak in sacrament meeting, you can know that that opportunity to serve has come from the Lord through His servants through the council.