

Reach Out and Lift Up: The Foundations of LDS Welfare and Humanitarian Efforts

Chapman University/John A. Widtsoe Foundation

Bishop Gérald Caussé

February 20, 2018

INTRODUCTION

Ladies and gentlemen, what a pleasure it is to be with you this evening. I am honored by the invitation from the Fish Interfaith Center and the Latter-day Saint Student Association under the auspices of the John A. Widtsoe Foundation to speak with you tonight. I commend you on your efforts and commitment to foster understanding of how the Church and its members engage in our modern world—how they can make a difference as they associate with other faith, education and civic leaders to make this world a better place to live.

And thank you for the beautiful music! I am grateful for the opportunity to be among so many who share our values of community service and interfaith harmony. The topic I have been asked to speak on is one that is very near and dear to my heart.

When I was called to be the Presiding Bishop of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints a little over two years ago, Thomas S. Monson, who was the President of the Church at that time, summarized my responsibilities in just a few short—but somewhat daunting—phrases. One of those was that I was to “care for the poor and the needy.” Just thinking of the magnitude of that charge could have been enough to leave me feeling the weight of the world upon me, but what kept me from buckling under that weight was the knowledge that a vast and inspired system for caring for the poor and needy had already been designed and refined by those who came before me—a system so unique and remarkable that it has gained worldwide recognition for its ability to take care not only of the Church’s own, but to also reach out to millions of others across the world.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHURCH’S WELFARE PROGRAM



Mormon in America: A guided tour of the Bishops' storehouse
In a nondescript industrial park in Salt Lake City, the Mormon Church maintains a vast 500,000 sq. ft. warehouse with enough goods to rival your local Costco. From wheelchairs and toilet paper to sugar and bread, The Utah Bishops' Central Warehouse is stocked. Rock Center's Harry Smith took a tour of the warehouse for his upcoming report airing August 23 at 10/9c on NBC.

Mormon Welfare Program
June 24, 2016

There may be other charities that are larger or more helpful, but the welfare tradition within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must be one of the world's best. As correspondent Lucky Severson reports from Salt Lake City, the program supplies food, clothes, and all kinds of care to those in need—Mormon or not. The relief is always free, and the men and women who do the work—growers, packers, distributors, and caregivers—are all volunteers.

In This Episode
Religion and Presidential Politics 2016: Mormon Welfare Program; Quakers in Costa Rica; Bring a Friend to Mosque; Religion and Presidential Politics 2016; Mormon Welfare Program; Quakers in Costa Rica; Bring a Friend to Mosque

In fact, the welfare program of the Church frequently makes headlines. An NBC News report from 2012, for instance, reads: “In [an] industrial park in Salt Lake City, the Mormon Church maintains a vast 500,000 square-foot warehouse with enough goods to rival your local Costco” (NBC News, 23 Aug 2012). And a 2016 Religious and Ethics Newsweekly report adds: “Everything goes through here to...114 storehouses across the country [with] enough provisions to meet the projected demands...in the U.S. and Canada for two years” (“Mormon Welfare Program,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, 24 June 2016).

Statistics such as these are eagerly consumed in a society that is fascinated with size and complexity. But I would argue that to understand the heart of the LDS Church’s welfare and humanitarian efforts, we need to look well beyond the facts and figures. Allow me to illustrate my point with a few images.



The photo you see here is a common depiction of our disaster relief efforts around the world, with our volunteers sporting their iconic “Mormon Helping Hands” T-shirts. Reports coming to my office will commonly cite the number of volunteers who showed up following the disaster, the volume of hours they donated, and even the quantity of tools and supplies we shipped to enable them to do their work. But allow me to show you another photo that reveals more about what takes place at the personal level—both for these volunteers and for those whom they serve.



On the surface, this photo—taken in September in Houston—looks similar, but let me tell you a little about each of the individuals shown here. In the foreground you see an 11-year-old young man who has already brought out dozens of loads of debris from this home and is taking a well-deserved (but brief!) rest. His parents, not pictured, are still working inside the home with their other son. On the left, you see a gentleman who is *not* in a yellow T-shirt. He is a member of another religious congregation working alongside our own volunteers. At the center of the photo, is the young man’s grandmother, Kathy, listening to the exhausted homeowner, whom I’ll call Linda, recount her attempts to deal with the destruction of her home while her husband is in the midst of battling colon cancer. Just a few seconds later, the photo would have shown the two women embracing as Linda tearfully tells Kathy that she doesn’t know how she would have managed without the volunteers’ help and as Kathy comforts Linda shortly before she drives to the hospital to be present for her husband’s next procedure. And finally, also not pictured are Kathy’s own parents who, at nearly 80 years of age, are helping to run the volunteer command center in Houston.

To me, this photo reveals the *true* essence of the Church’s humanitarian outreach. Undoubtedly, the huge mess was cleaned up, and we could even measure the volume of the cleanup in pounds or cubic feet of debris cleared. But what we may not be able to measure is the increase in work ethic and human compassion of the young man who helped, or the unity developed among the four generations of his family as they worked side by side, or the interfaith harmony created among the two separate religious groups as they labored together for a common cause. And what about the extent to which Linda’s emotional burden was lightened, or the degree to which Kathy’s own spirit was uplifted as she reached out to give personal comfort to Linda?



Let me share another comparison. This is the grain silo at Welfare Square, the central facility of the Church’s welfare system in Salt Lake City, with the silo as its most imposing feature. As such, it has become an icon of the welfare program, and visitors to the Square are commonly informed of the 16 million pounds of wheat it can hold and of the amount of bread and pasta that can be produced from that wheat and distributed throughout our bishops’ storehouses in North America.



Visitors may also be informed about how the wheat in this silo comes from farms that make up just a part of the Church's 49 agricultural properties that are dedicated to the sole purpose of providing for those in need, or how it is milled at one of six processing facilities in which the produce from these



farms, ranches, and orchards is prepared and packaged for distribution. As visitors continue to walk around Welfare Square, they may be introduced to one of our 43 Deseret Industries stores, where the



recycling and sale of donated goods creates work training opportunities for thousands of individuals who face barriers to employment, or to one of our 94 self-reliance centers, where those seeking better

education or employment are provided with principles, tools, and counsel to help them achieve that goal. But again, while these facilities are all notable examples of the *resources* that empower the welfare system, they are—in my mind—not its *heart*.



WELFARE AT THE LEVEL OF THE WARD AND FAMILY

I would assert that the heart of the program is more accurately captured in *this* photo. This is one of the Church’s 30,000 bishops, or congregational leaders, visiting a family to carry out one of his primary responsibilities—to check on the well-being of a family within his congregation, or “ward,” as



we call it. If he finds the family is lacking basic necessities, he may indeed activate the resources of the Church to provide food—perhaps even some of that bread or pasta—from one of the storehouses or to draw from cash donations to purchase needed medications. But beyond that, he will marshal the human capacity of other ward leaders who surround him. The men’s organizations, known as priesthood quorums, may rally around the parents to help them obtain gainful employment or make needed repairs to the home. The women’s organization, known as the Relief Society, might help with child care, transportation, or similar services during times of illness. And in the process, both the giver and the receiver of service will be uplifted and develop bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood.

Another glimpse into the heart of the Church’s welfare and humanitarian efforts is provided as we consider how these programs are funded. Again, a story might be the best way to explain. After

listening to the accounts of the heavy destruction from the hurricanes in the U.S. and the Caribbean last year, a couple sat down with their young children to talk about what happened and to discuss what they, as a family, could do. One day later, their bishop received a knock on his office door. He opened



to find this family, with each of their three small children handing him an envelope of coins—along with an envelope containing a more substantial amount from the parents—with the request that the bishop put this money toward the Church’s humanitarian fund. This was in addition to another set of donations, known as “fast offerings,” which this same family contributes *every month*.

By way of explanation, the humanitarian fund covers the Church’s response to disasters and its core humanitarian programs—such as wheelchairs, clean water, and vision care—throughout the world. Fast offerings, on the other hand, provide the funds which bishops use to take care of the individual needs of families in their congregations. These contributions derive their name from Church members’ practice of fasting—or going without meals—for one day each month and then donating the money that they saved from those uneaten meals. It is interesting to note that the principle of the widow’s mite is alive and well. While we certainly do have large donors, a recent study revealed that over half of the increase to the humanitarian fund last year came from thousands of smaller donations of \$1,500 or less.

What drives individuals, most of whom are not wealthy, to make these personal sacrifices? The first answer, of course—and one that is not unique to Mormons—is devotion to Jesus Christ and His gospel, and particularly to what Christ referred to in Matthew 22 as the second great commandment—that is, that “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:39).

CONNECTION BETWEEN THE TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL

The question might be asked: “Why should a church deal with so-called “temporal” matters such as food production, or employment counseling, or clothing donation...or even wheelchairs? Shouldn’t it be focused on spiritual matters, such as prayers, and scriptural passages, and sermons?” Such questioning elicits a core principle—that the temporal and spiritual aspects of our lives are fundamentally intertwined. A prominent Church leader once stated: “You can’t have peace of mind and be in want materially. You can’t have the spirit of the gospel in your hearts with an empty

stomach, and so in the plan of the Master there is provision not only for the salvation of the spirit of man, but also for his physical being” (Matthew Cowley, *BYU Speeches of the Year*, October 20, 1953).

This same principle was amply illustrated in the life of the Savior himself. While much of his time was dedicated to teaching—as evidenced by his powerful sermons and parables—the Biblical accounts are just as replete with examples of his feeding the multitudes and healing the infirm. One notable example occurs during Christ’s healing of the man afflicted with palsy, as recounted in the



second chapter of Mark. Christ surprises the onlookers by first telling the man he is forgiven of his sins before physically healing him. When questioned about this unexpected approach, the Savior pointed out the relationship between spiritual and physical healing as he asked: “...Is it easier to say...Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk?” (Mark 2:9).

It is our conviction that no person can truly claim to love *God* without also reaching out and lifting up God’s *children*, both through offering spiritual comfort and providing for temporal wants. Those two aspects of service are more closely connected than we may often realize.

THE EXAMPLE OF PRESIDENT THOMAS S. MONSON

Of those I have personally known in my life, there is no one who understood or exemplified these dual but related aspects of service more fully than our recently departed president, Thomas S.



Monson. While it was a singular privilege to be set apart as the Presiding Bishop under his hands, it was in some ways also overwhelming, because I knew very well the type of bishop he was himself!

President Monson was called at the remarkably young age of 22 to be the bishop of a congregation of 1,080 members—many of whom were struggling financially, and 85 of whom were widows. At Christmastime, he would take days off work so that he could pay a personal visit to each of those widows and even deliver Christmas chickens to them. When he was called to be an Apostle of the Church 14 years later, one would think that his demanding schedule of administering Church business, traveling, and teaching would disrupt his ability to reach out on such an individual level. But President Monson operated on a higher plane than most of us—until the very last years of his life, he



would be found in his “free” time visiting hospitals, care facilities, and homes of the elderly to lift and to cheer. He understood that regardless of how many sermons he preached over the pulpit, what mattered even more would be the sermon that he taught and exemplified through his life. It is from President Monson’s example that I learned that the welfare program of the Church is simply a support system, designed to facilitate what really matters, which is the service for and by individual people, with the end of lifting them both temporally and spiritually.

Under President Monson’s leadership, caring for the poor and the needy—though a core practice of Church members since the Church’s inception—was formally recognized as one of the four divinely appointed missions of the Church. This emphasis will undoubtedly continue under our new



president, Russell M. Nelson, who shares President Monson’s commitment to those in need and who has declared that “Few, if any, of the Lord’s instructions are stated more often, or given greater emphasis, than the commandment to care for the poor and the needy” (“In the Lord’s Own Way,” *Ensign*, May 1986).

BLESSINGS TO BOTH GIVER AND RECEIVER

The second answer as to why Church members may be so quick to donate of their time and means is that they have come to understand not only the impact that their contributions or service will have on those in need, but also the impact that it will have on themselves and on their family members who serve with them. Remember the example of the young children who handed their coins to the bishop. Those coins may translate to a portion of food or a drink of clean water to another child—the

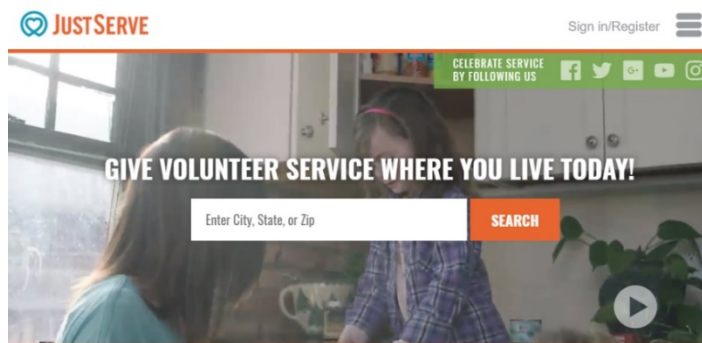


receiver—who will experience, first, *physical* relief and, second, *spiritual* comfort to know that there are those who care. And as for the young *givers*, their hearts will be touched at an early age with a pattern of gratitude for what they themselves have and pattern of active compassion for those who may lack.

It is this phenomenon—the mutually beneficial impact that service has on both giver and receiver—that drives us as a Church to not only provide aid through donated money and supplies, but



to build in opportunities for service and personal interaction. We have even developed a website, JustServe.org, that can be used in any community to publicize needs and allow Church and community



At JustServe, we believe that nothing should get in the way of organizations and volunteers coming together to do good things for the community, so we help make this happen **for free**.

members to select and sign up for service opportunities. In reality, we are known at least as much—if not more—for our humanitarian volunteers as we are for our humanitarian programs and funds. This is intentional, and it is reflective of our theology. For Mormons, the “church” is not merely defined as the building in which we meet or even the organization itself. Rather, the definition of the “church” might be derived from a passage in the Book of Mormon, which states: “And...they [meaning the group of believers] did do all things even as Jesus had commanded them. And they who were baptized in the name of Jesus were called the church of Christ” (3 Nephi 26:20-21). In other words, the Church is all about the individual members who are bound together by common beliefs and values. These commonalities are developed as we interact and serve with one another.

This concept of the Church being the sum of its individual members can in many ways be expanded to apply to our overall welfare and humanitarian programs. At the core, they are no more or less than a collection of individual donors and volunteers who contribute their time and means for a worthwhile cause. And in this case, our church “family,” if you will, is expanded to include partners and community members who, though not of our faith, are nonetheless united with us by the shared value of caring for those in need. It is as we interact with each other, serving side by side, that we are mutually uplifted by one another, and it is for this reason that we strive to include volunteer service in our humanitarian efforts whenever possible.

WORK AND SELF-RELIANCE

Another reason for encouraging volunteerism is because it fosters a love for work. As I have mingled with our members who engage in disaster cleanup projects, I have always been impressed with the smiles on their faces as they are carrying out some very taxing and sometimes unpleasant tasks. In part, these smiles come from the satisfaction of tackling and accomplishing a hard job. It is likewise remarkable to observe how those who have suffered losses in these disasters, as they team up with our volunteers and work alongside them, can feel their own worry and grief begin to give way.



The participation of those who have been affected is also important from the standpoint that it reinforces the principle of self-reliance. Rather than being passive receivers of service, they contribute their own labor to the effort. Self-reliance has been a foundational principle of the Church's welfare program ever since its inception, which occurred during the years of the Great Depression. In 1930, unemployment in some sections of Salt Lake City reached nearly 70%. While local congregational leaders were certainly concerned with their members' lack of necessities, what alarmed them just as much was the rampant idleness that was leading to discouragement, hopelessness, and even family tensions.

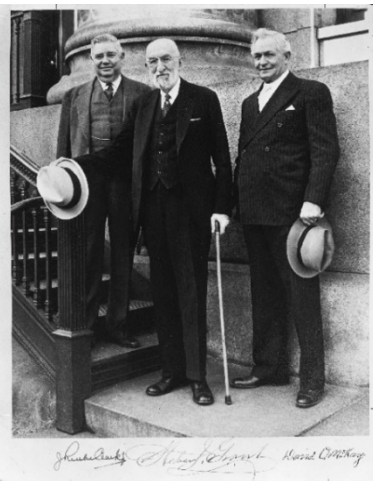


In this setting, a group of leaders were inspired to reach out to local farmers, who could not afford to hire enough labor to harvest all of their crops and had to leave much of their produce to spoil. These leaders arranged with farmers to put the men in their congregations to work on the farms, where they would be paid not with dollars, but with a portion of the food that they helped to harvest. This proved so successful that there was not only enough for these laborers and their families, but also a surplus to provide for others in need, and the canneries and storehouses that were set up to process and distribute this surplus were the beginnings of today's welfare system. But just as importantly, this plan provided hundreds who would have otherwise been unemployed with the blessing of work, which in turn fostered a return of their self-esteem.



Notably, when the First Presidency of the Church formally organized and announced the welfare program a few years later, the statement they issued focused not on the material aspects of the system, but rather on the core principles underlying the program and the effect these would have on the people. I quote: “Our primary purpose was to set up...a system under which the curse of idleness

“Our primary purpose was to set up...a system under which the curse of idleness would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift and self-respect be once more established among our people. The aim of the Church is to help the people to help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as the ruling principle of the lives of our [members].”



would be done away with, the evils of a dole abolished, and independence, industry, thrift and self-respect be once more established among our people. The aim of the Church is to help the people to help themselves. Work is to be re-enthroned as the ruling principle of the lives of our [members]” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1936, 3).



Eighty years later, this statement still guides all our welfare and humanitarian efforts. Recipients of goods at the bishops' storehouses don't just take a handout—they are asked to provide work or service for what they receive and are helped to get back on their own feet as soon as possible. Rural communities in developing countries don't just receive a water system—they contribute all the labor they can and form a committee who is trained to oversee its long-term maintenance. Why? Because the focus is not on the provision of resources, but rather on the building and lifting of the people.

PREPAREDNESS AND ORGANIZATION

In speaking of the value of self-reliance, I would be incomplete in my comments if I failed to mention the practice of preparedness. Many are aware of Church members' long-time practice of maintaining supply of food, water, and other essentials in their homes, as well as a financial reserve in



their accounts. Some believe that we do this in anticipation of some apocalyptic event. Undoubtedly, such a supply does come in useful in the wake of a natural disaster. But much more frequently, we see members drawing upon their reserves to help them weather more commonplace events, such as a prolonged job loss or illness. Furthermore, the principles of preparedness and self-reliance are not only intended to benefit oneself and one's family, but also one's neighbors and community. From an early age, Church members are taught how to work in councils to prepare for and solve any range of challenges they may face. As is the case with an example I would like to share with you from Hurricane Harvey, the result is sometimes remarkable.



The man in the photo you see here is Phil Garner. He is an elders quorum president—meaning the leader of a group of several dozen men—in his ward in Houston. When the flooding occurred, his own family was taken care of because they had an adequate stock of supplies, so he felt a desire to help out in his community. He phoned a friend who was a deputy and said, “I have a boat—is there any way I can help?” It turns out that the sheriff’s department was completely overloaded with calls, so his friend gladly accepted the offer and gave him the address of a family in need of rescue.



As Phil took his boat to the flooded neighborhood and picked up the family, he noticed that no other rescue vehicles were out and realized that action was needed on a much larger scale. He returned home and posted on his ward’s social media group that there was a need for rescue boats, hoping that he might get another couple of boats and maybe a handful of volunteers. The next day, *dozens* of his ward members showed up at the designated meeting spot at their church—many brought boats, others brought food and supplies for those who would be rescued.



Learning of the organization, the sheriff’s office began channeling requests their way, and soon the scale became so large that the church was turned into a boat dispatch center and, eventually, into a shelter center for families who arrived with nowhere else to go, as Red Cross shelters reached capacity. As word of the effort got out, boat owners in the community began to join in, and within a matter of

days, 800 volunteers with 57 boats had come together to rescue over 850 residents. What began as one phone call from Phil turned into what some community officials called the most organized rescue effort operating anywhere in the city.

To outside observers, the management of this rescue effort seemed extraordinary. For Phil and his fellow ward members, it was simply putting into practice the principles of preparedness, organization, and leadership which they had learned through a lifetime of Church participation. What occurred in Houston is evidence of the principle that the Church's welfare system, at its core, is not a massive program managed from Utah. More often, it is the inspiration and initiative of a small group or single individual acting on basic values of self-reliance and caring for one's neighbor.

CONCLUSION

May I conclude my remarks by sharing with you my own experience in Houston following Hurricane Harvey? Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf, then of the Church's First Presidency, and I flew in just days after the flooding, both to observe the relief efforts and to be with and comfort the impacted members. As we neared the airport, I looked down to see a huge parking lot filled with hundreds of overturned vehicles. Arriving at the church building that had been designated as the central meeting place for the volunteers, we were expecting to see similar devastation—what we saw instead both surprised and humbled us. As we entered the church building—the same one from which the boat rescue effort had been operated just days prior—we found over 700 members in yellow T-shirts, all



with smiles on their faces and ready to work, inside a facility that had been cleaned until it was sparkling. There was no doubt that many of these individuals had had their own homes affected, but for that day they had decided to turn outward, and by doing so boosted their own hope and morale.

As I looked out over that vast congregation of yellow shirts, there was no question in my mind that the welfare program of the Church does indeed relieve suffering on a large scale, but what was clearly the most impressive to me is the change that it effects within each individual. By reaching out to lift others, these volunteers were lifted themselves. I witnessed in that scene, and in so many others like it around the world, the fulfillment of another of the early statements made by the First Presidency, with which I would like to close: “The real long-term objective of the Welfare Plan is the building of



“The real long-term objective of the Welfare Plan is the building of character in [both] givers and receivers, rescuing all that is finest down deep inside of them, and bringing to flower and fruitage the latent richness of the spirit, which after all is the mission and purpose and reason for being of this Church.”

character in [both] givers and receivers, rescuing all that is finest down deep inside of them, and bringing to flower and fruitage the latent richness of the spirit, which after all is the mission and purpose and reason for being of this Church” (J. Reuben Clark, Jr., in special meeting of stake presidents, Oct. 2, 1936). I wholeheartedly echo that sentiment.

Thank you.