

Episode 10

Stories from General Relief Society Meetings

CALLINGS

NARRATOR: From the Conference Center in Salt Lake City, Utah welcome to Stories from the General Relief Society Meetings.

This episode is on accepting and magnify callings in the church. In this context a “calling” may be defined as a church-related assignment a person is asked to perform by the leaders of a church unit. Normally these leaders would also be functioning in such a “calling” themselves. “Callings” are made under inspiration and provide opportunities for service.

We introduce this topic with a story from Sister Mary Ellen Smoot from the 1998 General Relief Society meeting. Sister Smoot tells about one of the first things she was asked to do by a church leader.

(Mary Ellen Smoot, October 1998 General Relief Society Meeting)

As a teenager I attended stake conference with my parents. Elder Harold B. Lee was the presiding authority and speaker.

My father had been up all night long watering his 10-acre field of strawberries. He was fighting to stay awake and most of the time losing the battle. But he wouldn't think of staying away from stake conference, especially knowing that Elder Lee would be speaking.

We were all a little surprised when Elder Lee stood and started calling some young women from the audience to share their testimonies. My father, who was usually right about such things, poked me and said, "You'll be the next speaker." I thought, *Surely he will not call on me. I'm sitting in the first row of the recreation hall.* As I looked up the aisle, I realized how far it would be to the pulpit. *I was* the next to be called. And sure enough, it was the longest walk I'd taken in my life.

I accepted that invitation from Elder Lee, and as I walked back to my seat, dear people in the audience would squeeze my arm or pat my hand. I was lifted by that experience, and we will each be lifted as we gain the courage to accept invitations from the Lord and His leaders. The invitation to walk with the Lord is a long walk.

NARRATOR: Sometimes our church leaders ask us to do things we are not comfortable with, or seem difficult. In the same address, Sister Mary Ellen Smoot tells about some of her ancestors who responded to callings at great sacrifice.

(Mary Ellen Smoot, October 1998 General Relief Society Meeting)

My great-great-grandfather Israel Stoddard accepted an invitation to join the Church in 1842. Then he accepted another invitation to join the Saints, and the family moved from New Jersey to Nauvoo. When President Brigham Young extended an invitation to follow him west, they accepted.

As the family crossed the Mississippi River, they looked back and watched as their home was burned. Because of exposure to harsh elements and hardships their mother died, five weeks later the infant baby died, and shortly

thereafter the father passed away. As my grandmother wrote, "This left five Stoddard children homeless and almost penniless but not friendless as the Saints were good to them."

This invitation took the lives of the parents and their small child; however, it bound them together eternally.

NARRATOR: Of course, we will likely not be asked to make such sacrifices today as did these early members of the church. Our conditions have changed, but the service we render is always of eternal consequence.

In the next story, Sister Kathleen H. Hughes tells us how she responded to a calling that was not life-threatening, but still difficult for her at the time. This is from the 2004 General Relief Society meeting.

(Kathleen H. Hughes, October 2004 General Relief Society Meeting)

We must prepare if we wish to serve, and we must serve if we wish to prepare. I was 16 I was called to teach the three-year-olds in what was then called Junior Sunday School. (You know there was such a thing in the olden days.) I taught some busy children. They climbed on and under the chairs and table and never seemed to stop moving. I was dreadfully inexperienced, and during the first few weeks I wondered if I had done the right thing in accepting the call.

But I persisted, and what I learned—quickly—was that I couldn't just *pray* for help. I had to be prepared. That meant planning activities, stories, and lessons, and it meant having plan B ready, along with C through Z. Many years later, when I was called to lead a Junior Sunday School, I knew how to assist new teachers. I knew how to enjoy the children, and I knew the importance of being faithful in my calling.

I, like many of you, have had numerous callings in the Church. Some have been easier for me than others, but I have tried to magnify each one. But does the phrase "magnify your calling" ever make you nervous? It has worried me! Recently I read a talk in which President Thomas S. Monson said on the subject: "And how does one magnify a calling? Simply by performing the service that pertains to it" ("Priesthood Power," *Liahona*, Jan. 2000, 60; *Ensign*, Nov. 1999, 51). Sisters, we can do that! I hear women say that their callings are wearing them out or that they don't have time to serve. But magnifying our callings does not mean staying up all night preparing handouts and elaborate table decorations. It does not mean that each time we do our visiting teaching we have to take something to our sisters. Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. Let's simplify. The message of a good lesson comes through *spiritual* preparation. Let's put our focus on the principles of the gospel and on the material in our study guides. Let's prepare to create an interesting exchange of ideas through discussion, not through extra, invented work that makes us so weary we come to resent the time we spend in fulfilling our callings.

NARRATOR: This message of spiritual preparation carries over into our next story from Sister Mary Ellen Smoot, given during the 1998 General Relief Society meeting.

(Mary Ellen Smoot, October 1998 General Relief Society Meeting)

Let me share with you the feelings of a sister about how Relief Society helped her to spiritually prepare. I was so inspired by her faith that I asked her to write her testimony and send it to me. Allow me to read a portion of it.

She writes: "What a blessing the Relief Society has been in my life. I was divorced--a single mother of a small daughter. I had also lost a son. I spent hours on my knees calling for help from my Savior and Heavenly Father.

But there was the Relief Society. It was my organization. All week I struggled trying to provide for my little daughter and myself on my small wages and minimal education. Every Sunday we went to church. It seemed to me that going to Relief Society each week helped me become a stronger and better sister. Not that I missed my other meetings; I didn't. I went because I knew that's where I was supposed to be. I went and then feasted on the word and especially Relief Society. It was my 'relief' and my 'society.' I belonged; I felt a part. I lost myself in lessons, service to others . . . and to my little child. I found if I kept my mind and hands busy there was less time to think of the pain of the past. . . . But through all those years what I remember most was the belonging I felt--to the organization my Lord and Savior gave to all the sisters, not just to me."

As sisters in Relief Society we are to assist one another preparing for the day the bridegroom returns. By actively taking part in the Relief Society organization, our lamps will be full. Our faith will remain strong.

NARRATOR: Every woman of the church is a member of the Relief Society and can benefit by active participation. In the next story, President Gordon B. Hinckley reflects on his appreciation of women who have carried out their Relief Society callings.

(President Gordon B. Hinckley, October 1998 General Relief Society Meeting)

At the marriage of each of our daughters and granddaughters, my wife has presented a special gift. It is not a vacuum cleaner or dishes or anything utilitarian. It is a seven-generation family history chart of her maternal line, beautifully framed. It is made up of photographs of her maternal great-great-grandmother, of her great-grandmother, of her grandmother, her mother, herself, her daughter, and her newly married granddaughter.

Every woman in that picture for seven generations has been a Relief Society worker. This beautiful family history chart becomes an ever-present reminder to the younger ones of this generation of the great responsibility they carry, of the great obligation they have to move forward this work in the tradition of their mothers and grandmothers in service in the Relief Society organization.

You and your forebears have walked in the light of the Lord. From the beginning it has been your most important responsibility to see that no one goes hungry, to see that no one goes without adequate clothing, that no one goes without shelter. It has been and is your responsibility to visit your sisters wherever they may be found, to give encouragement as they may need it, to assure them of love and concern and interest. It is and has been your opportunity to tear away the curtain of darkness that enshrouds those who are illiterate and to bring into their lives the light of understanding as you teach them to read and to write.

It is and has been your opportunity to mingle together as sisters who love and honor and respect one another, to bring the blessings of pleasant sociality into the lives of tens of thousands who, without you, would be left in very bleak and lonely circumstances.

NARRATORS: Relief Society Sisters can do much good by reaching out to others. One way to do that is by accepting a calling to be a visiting teacher. A visiting teacher takes the assignment to visit several sisters each month with an inspirational message and a personal contact.

In the 2007 General Relief Society meeting, Sister Silvia H. Allred shares a story about a sister that fulfilled her calling as a visiting teacher.

(Silvia H. Allred, October 2007, General Relief Society Meeting)

Visiting teaching is also a very effective tool in retention and reactivation efforts. A young single adult sister shared the following:

“While reading the First Presidency Message from the *Ensign*, I was reminded of my visiting teaching assignment. My companion was a good friend of mine, but we always seemed to have conflicting schedules. That morning I decided to just make the calls to our sisters, schedule a time, and hope that it would work with my companion’s schedule. Unfortunately, my companion was unable to make it. I asked a couple of my roommates to join me for those visits, but no one was available. Knowing that doing my visiting teaching alone wasn’t ideal, I thought about calling to cancel but decided it was better to make visits by myself than let another month slip by without visiting our sisters.

“I arrived at Alejandra’s home and nervously approached her door, not knowing if I would recognize her. She had been very friendly on the phone, so I imagined it was a sister I had seen at church. Alejandra greeted me with a warm hug and a big smile. It was a new face! During our conversation, Alejandra shared her desire to start going to church again and said she had been hoping for some kind of visit for the past few months. She stated that this was the first time she had ever received a visiting teacher. We talked about some gospel principles and shared our impressions of that month’s Visiting Teaching Message. She committed to going to church that week. Sure enough, she did (she even brought her boyfriend)!

“Since then, Alejandra and I have become good friends. I am no longer her visiting teacher, but we visit much more than once a month. Alejandra attends church and family home evening regularly and is attending institute.

“I now have a stronger testimony of visiting teaching than ever before. I am grateful for the guidance of the Holy Ghost and His subtle prompting that would lead me to such a kind and loving friend like Alejandra. We were equally strengthened from this experience, and we both needed it for our spiritual progression.”

NARRATOR: In the 2000 General Relief Society Meeting, Sister Virginia U. Jensen shares a story about some visiting teachers who responded to their calling and helped bring an entire family back into church activity.

(Virginia U. Jensen, October 2000 General Relief Society Meeting)

My friend Tammy stopped attending church when she was just 15 years old. Around the corner from Tammy lived a young man who also decided in his mid-teens that he didn't want to be part of the Church. They both developed habits that took them further away from Church activity. Eventually, they married and began to raise a family.

Tammy loved her husband and her two daughters very much, but deep in her heart bubbled a longing to go back to the life she had known as a child. She faintly remembered feeling her Heavenly Father's Spirit and influence with her, and she missed Him. Reluctant to share these thoughts with her husband for fear he would not approve, she kept them hidden. She wanted to come back, but she just didn't know how to begin. Let's listen to her own words as she tells the ripple effect of two wonderful visiting teachers who "[drew] water [from] the wells of salvation" and shared it with Tammy.

[Video transcript of Tammy Clayton]

I'm grateful to this day for my visiting teachers because they loved me and they didn't judge me. They really made me feel as though I really was important and that I did have a place in the Church.

They'd come over to my home and we would sit and we'd visit. After a while, they'd ask me if I wanted a lesson, and they would leave me a message each month.

And when they came every month, it made me feel as if I really did matter and as though they really did care about me and as though they really loved me and appreciated me.

Through their visiting and coming to see us, I decided that it was time for me to go back to church. I guess I just really didn't know how to come back, and by their coming and reaching out to me, they provided a way that I could return.

We need to realize that the Lord loves us no matter who we are, and my visiting teachers helped me see that this was right.

Now my husband and I have been sealed in the temple.

NARRATOR: Completing callings faithfully can reap great and sometimes unexpected rewards. In the next story, told by President S. Monson, we have an example of this principle. This is from the 2001 General Relief Society Meeting.

(President Thomas S. Monson, October 2001 General Relief Society Meeting)

Many years ago there was a young woman, Baur Dee Sheffield, who taught in Mutual. She had no children of her own, though she and her husband dearly longed for children. Her love was expressed through devotion to her special young women as each week she taught them eternal truths and lessons of life. Then came illness, followed by death. She was but 27.

Each year, on Memorial Day, her Mutual girls made a pilgrimage of prayer to the graveside of their teacher, always leaving flowers and a little card signed "To Baur Dee, from your girls." First there were 10 girls who went, then five, then two, and eventually just one, who continues to visit each Memorial Day, always placing on the grave a bouquet of flowers and a card, inscribed as always, "To Baur Dee, from your girls."

One year, nearly 25 years after Baur Dee's death, the only one of "her girls" who continued to visit the grave realized she would be away on Memorial Day and decided to visit her teacher's grave a few days early. She had gathered flowers, tied them with a ribbon, attached a card, and was putting on her jacket to leave when her doorbell rang. She opened the door and was greeted by one of her visiting teachers, Colleen Fuller, who said she had experienced difficulty getting together with her visiting teaching partner and so had decided to come alone and unannounced in an effort to complete her visiting teaching before the end of the month. As Colleen was invited in, she noticed the jacket and flowers and apologized for obviously interrupting whatever had been planned.

"Oh, no problem," came the response. "I'm just on my way to the cemetery to put flowers on the grave of the woman who was my Mutual teacher, who had a profound influence on me and the other girls she taught. Originally about 10 of us visited her grave each year to express our love and thanks to her, but now I represent the group."

Colleen asked, "Could your teacher's name have been Baur Dee?"

"Why, yes," came the answer. "How did you know?"

With a catch in her voice, Colleen said, "Baur Dee was my aunt—my mother's sister. Every Memorial Day since she died, my family has found on her grave a bouquet of flowers and a card inscribed from Baur Dee's girls. They've always wanted to know who these girls were so they could thank them for remembering Baur Dee. Now I can let them know."

Said American author Thornton Wilder, "The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude."

NARRATOR: No matter what our *formal* calling, all are called to stand as ambassadors of the Lord. In the last two stories, Sister Sheri Dew talks about what it means to stand for something. The first is from the 2000 General Relief Society Meeting.

(Sheri L. Dew, October 2000 General Relief Society Meeting)

By the time I turned 12, I was a 5-foot 10-inch social disaster. Towering over my friends was the bane of my adolescence. I didn't want to stand out--at least not that way--so I compensated by slouching. As a result, Mother was constantly urging me to "stand up straight." Well, I didn't want to stand up straight then, but I do now. For we have all been admonished to "stand up" (2 Ne. 8:17) and to stand as a witness (see Mosiah 18:9) so that we may "stand blameless before God at the last day" (D&C 4:2). I can find absolutely no scriptural injunction to slouch in Zion. Instead, we are repeatedly told to get on our feet, to "arise and stand up" (3 Ne. 20:2).

As a teenager I did not realize that blending in with the crowd would never be my lot. Nor is it yours. For as women of God we must stand tall so that we will stand out from the rest of the world. Only in doing so may we hope to find joy. For finding joy and standing tall, not in feet or inches but as ambassadors for the Lord, are directly connected.

NARRATOR: Our last example comes from the 1997 General Relief Society Meeting. Sister Sheri L. Dew talks about her grandmother, whose example had a profound influence on her.

(Sheri L. Dew, October 1997 General Relief Society Meeting)

Remember Grandma? She lived a simple life in an obscure corner of the vineyard. There are only a handful of people still living who even remember her.

But I remember her. Though she died when I was just 11, I was profoundly influenced by this one faithful woman. In like manner, each of us is vital to the Lord's cause. How much good might we do if at this very hour we rededicated ourselves to Him who is our Redeemer and our Rescuer? How much righteous influence might we have if we joined the Young Women in their pledge to "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places" (Mosiah 18:9)?

NARRATOR: It is by standing for what we believe in that we show others the right way. As we function in our callings, we can have a positive influence on others by both word and example.

Thank you for listening to another episode of "Stories from the General Relief Society Meetings" on the Mormon channel. Today's episode was about performing our callings. For more information check out radio.lds.org. We hope you'll tell your friends about us!