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The Welfare Responsibilities of the Relief Society President



PURPOSE OF RELIEF SOCIETY

My dear brothers and sisters, it is a privilege to speak to you about the responsibilities of the ward Relief Society president regarding welfare. Behind me are portraits of the women who have served as general presidents of

the Relief Society. As I have studied their histories, I am reminded that this organization has accomplished its work in times of growth and prosperity but also during times of war, famine, epidemic, and depression. The lessons we learn from the past can help us navigate in our day as we are experiencing natural disasters, wars, government upheavals, personal trials, and economic troubles. Relief Society is meant to provide *relief*, which means to lift up, to lighten, to raise someone up or out of trouble.¹ We have always been charged with helping women and their families in their lifelong responsibilities to increase faith and personal righteousness, strengthen families and homes, and serve the Lord and His children. Today we will focus on that portion of our work that concerns welfare as we discuss working under the direction of the bishop to organize, teach, and inspire

sisters to look after the poor and needy and help them become self-reliant.

LOOKING AFTER THE POOR AND THE NEEDY

Relief Society, which has responsibility “to look after the spiritual welfare and salvation . . . of all the female members of the Church,”² was organized to provide “relief of the poor, the destitute, the widow and the orphan, and for the exercise of all benevolent purposes.”³ This includes “relief of poverty, relief of illness, relief of doubt, relief of ignorance—relief of all that hinders the joy and progress of woman.”⁴

I have heard President Monson speak with great appreciation about the Relief Society presidents who served with him when he was a young bishop. He and his Relief Society presidents followed the same model we have today. Under his direction, the Relief Society president went into the homes of the members to discover whether or not there was sufficient food, furnishings, skills, emotional strength, or other necessities. With the help of prayer and the spiritual gifts they possessed, his Relief Society presidents sought inspiration to make a proper evaluation of the needs in those homes. Using their assessment, he was then able to develop a self-reliance plan for his people.

SELF-RELIANCE AND PROVIDENT LIVING

Along with the responsibility for helping the bishop look after those in need, Relief Society takes the lead in organizing, teaching, and inspiring Relief Society sisters to become personally self-reliant. To understand their responsibilities, leaders could ask some important questions:

1. What is self-reliance?
2. What are the personal responsibilities of every sister regarding self-reliance?
3. How self-reliant are the sisters in my ward?
4. What self-reliance skills do the sisters in my ward need to acquire?
5. How will we help one another become more self-reliant?

“Self-reliance means using all of our blessings from Heavenly Father to care for ourselves and our families and to find solutions for our own problems.”⁵ Each of

us has a responsibility to try to avoid problems before they happen and to learn to overcome challenges when they occur.

This painting, which hangs in my office, shows a woman in a storage room. What we learn from this



Woman With Food Storage,
by Judith A. Mehr

painting is not so much a lesson about storage rooms and home canning. Look at the woman. She stands alone, and we do not know if she is married or single. She is wearing an apron, which implies that she has been working. Work is a foundational principle of self-

reliance. We can assume that all the resources around her are the result of her own efforts. She has made some personal preparations. Look at her face. She seems a little weary but very peaceful. Her eyes show the contentment in her soul. She has the look of a self-reliant woman.

How do we become self-reliant? We become self-reliant through obtaining sufficient knowledge, education, and literacy; by managing money and resources wisely, being spiritually strong, preparing for emergencies and eventualities; and by having physical health and social and emotional well-being.

So what skills do we need to help us become self-reliant? It was important for my grandmother to know how to kill and pluck a chicken. I have not yet had the necessity to kill and pluck a chicken. However, even in the early days of the Church, Brigham Young pled with the sisters to learn to prevent illness in families, establish home industries, and learn accounting and book-keeping and other practical skills.⁶ Those principles still apply today. Education continues to be vitally important. Each of us is a teacher and a learner, and literacy, technical, and reasoning skills are a daily requirement. There is also a great need for better communication

skills in marriages and families, and good parenting skills have never been more important. We also see an increase of debt and consumerism in the world.

I asked several bishops what self-reliance skills the sisters in their wards needed most, and they said budgeting. Women need to understand the implications of buying on credit and not living within a budget. The second skill bishops listed was cooking. Meals prepared and eaten at home generally cost less, are healthier, and contribute to stronger family relationships.

I have seen great examples of sisters all over the world helping each other become self-reliant. In the United States, sisters are gathering to learn how to budget their finances so they can buy carefully and reduce debt. Older sisters are teaching younger women how to cook and prepare wholesome meals at home. In Ghana, sisters learn to read together. In Peru, sisters seal up rice and beans in packages so they won't go hungry when earthquakes strike. In the Philippines, where typhoons occur with regularity, sisters assemble short-term supplies and food to use when they need to evacuate their homes.



The Family Prayer, by Abelardo Loria Lovendino,
courtesy Church History Museum

A second painting that hangs in my office shows how this principle can be applied everywhere. Here we see a Filipino family in their nipa hut of sticks, which sits on stilts above ground. We see in the foreground their large jar of water. They have a basket of mangoes, they have some fuel to cook with, and they have a simple source of light to see by. They are sitting at the dinner table with heads bowed in prayer. Hanging on the wall are the hand-stitched words "Families are

Forever.” I would imagine the mother of this family learned many of the self-reliance principles and skills shown here in Relief Society meetings and activities.

How self-reliant are the sisters in your ward? How can you discern their needs? And who should help the Relief Society president in this effort? Because this is a divine work and because a Relief Society president has a divine call, she is entitled to divine help. She also has the help of good visiting teachers who understand their responsibility to watch over and care for those sisters. Through the reports she receives from them and other sisters, she is able to learn about their needs. She can also use the help of committees and younger sisters, who have great energy and are ready to serve.



Midwife: Thy Path Her Chosen Way, by Crystal Haueter, courtesy Church History Museum

This third painting that hangs in my office depicts a pioneer midwife. It reminds me that one sister, with one skill, can be a blessing to many. An example of this is my great-great-grandmother Mary Ann Hamblin, who was a midwife. She helped bring over 2,000 babies into this world. She made a valuable contribution to the Lord’s storehouse of time and talents.

Fulfilling Our Responsibilities

Providing for ourselves and others is evidence that we are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Like many of you, I have been inspired and taught principles of self-reliance by the example of my mother and other Relief Society sisters. One such woman was my sweet

mother-in-law, June, who served in Relief Society presidencies almost continuously for 30 years. When she passed away suddenly last year, she left evidence of her self-reliant life. She had a current temple recommend and well-used scriptures and gospel study manuals. We lovingly divided up the pots, pans, and dishes with which she had prepared thousands of meals. She left us quilts she had made from old clothing. She believed in the old adage “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” We saw the supply of food she had grown, preserved, and stored. Particularly touching were her little account books in which she faithfully recorded her expenditures over many years. Because she lived providently, she left some money she had saved for emergencies, and she left no debts! Most importantly, she had taught and inspired many others with the skills she had acquired during her faithful life.

As leaders, we demonstrate our faith when we use our time, talents, meetings, and activities to first take care of the things that are essential for temporal and spiritual welfare and salvation. As we do this, love, unity, joy, sisterhood, and blessings will abound. I testify that the work of Relief Society is an integral part of the Lord’s restored Church and that His work is directed by a living prophet today. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See *Online Etymology Dictionary*, “relief” and “relieve,” www.etymonline.com.
2. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society course of study, 1998), 185.
3. *History of the Church*, 4:567.
4. John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, arr. G. Homer Durham (1987), 308.
5. Instructional Resources for Welfare Trainers, Lesson 2: Self-Reliance, 3; PDF available online at providentliving.org.
6. See Eliza R. Snow, “Female Relief Society,” *Deseret News*, Apr. 22, 1868, 1; Brigham Young, *Deseret News*, July 28, 1869, 5.