



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 10 | Number 3

Article 20

9-1-2009

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Webb, Chad H. and Alford, Kenneth L. "Serving Students: A Conversation with Chad H. Webb." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 3 (2009). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol10/iss3/20>

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Serving Students: A Conversation with Chad H. Webb

Chad H. Webb and Kenneth L. Alford

Chad H. Webb serves as the administrator for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion.

Kenneth L. Alford (ken_alford@byu.edu) is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

Alford: What would you like readers to know about you?

Webb: Most importantly, my love for our Father in Heaven, my desire to serve him, and my love for my wife and children. As far as my responsibility with seminaries and institutes, I think my sole ambition is to do whatever we can to help teachers and bless the youth of the Church. Seminaries and institutes exist to bless and serve our students. I just want to do the best I can to serve Heavenly Father and to provide for the needs of our teachers and students.

Alford: I'm guessing that your current assignment as administrator for Seminaries and Institutes of Religion came as a surprise to you. What were your first thoughts?

Webb: I felt surprised and overwhelmed. In fact, when I was asked, I don't think I answered yes because I couldn't speak. My mouth opened, but I didn't say anything. Before I could say anything, Elder Johnson said, "Well, let's go call your wife." When we got on the phone with her, I still don't think I had said anything. It was pretty overwhelming and humbling. Later I went into my office and called my wife again and told her how overwhelmed and nervous I was, and she said, "In every case, the Lord has been with you, and he will be again. There's just no reason to be nervous." I've leaned on that and a few feelings that I had after that. I really do trust that it's Heavenly Father's work and that he is in charge. I also have great trust in our teachers.

I have confidence that things will move forward because Heavenly Father is in charge.

Alford: How did you decide that you wanted to spend your career serving in the Church's seminary and institute programs? I'm always curious how that happens.

Webb: I think it was a number of small things more than one big thing. I had a really wonderful experience as a sophomore in high school in a seminary class studying the New Testament, and as a sixteen-year-old, I remember thinking, "I want to do for somebody else what that teacher just did for me." I had a number of wonderful teachers that made me interested in seminary. I guess on some level, though, I forgot about that because when I was in college, I didn't know that's what I wanted to be. About a year after my mission, I was going to the College of Eastern Utah and attending institute there. The institute director asked if I would substitute teach his classes for a couple of days while he went to a convention. I taught a few classes in the following days and that was enough; when he came back, I was waiting outside of his office and asked, "How do I get this job?"

Alford: What does the road look like that has led you to your current assignment?

Webb: I started in the Salt Lake West area teaching at the Magna Seminary and at the Taylorsville Seminary. I was then invited to be a coordinator on the East Coast. After coordinating in the northern Virginia and Washington DC area for four years, I was asked to serve as a preservice trainer at the Ogden Institute. After one year there, I was appointed as manager for the seminary and institute preservice programs in the United States. Next I was asked to be an assistant administrator for one year with Elder Paul Johnson and one year with Gary Moore before being asked to serve as the administrator last year.

Alford: How did serving as a coordinator outside of Utah change your perspective on the seminary and institute programs?

Webb: When I started as a seminary teacher, I saw only one aspect of seminary and institute and that was the whole world to me. As a coordinator, I saw seminary and institute volunteers and what they do. Did you know that today there are more students being taught by volunteers than there are by full-time teachers? Another thing that serving as a coordinator did for me was to help me see the good teachers that are there; witnessing their sacrifice and dedication really changed me. They serve their students willingly without complaint, and I was blessed to see that.

I've seen many aspects of Church education, including one part we don't talk about often: our primary and secondary schools in the Pacific Islands and Mexico. It has been a blessing to see what's going on in the Church schools and to meet those teachers and administrators. It is an incredible blessing to see all of the wonderful people around the world blessing the youth of the Church.

Alford: What are some of the major responsibilities of your current position?

Webb: I think, again, it starts with the students. Our responsibility is to provide seminary and institute for the youth and young adults all over the world. Our hope is that we will teach the scriptures, by the Spirit, so that lives will be blessed. Last year there were almost seven hundred thousand students enrolled. We have large programs from released-time to daily and home-study classes and have as many institute students now as we do seminary students, so it is important to train our teachers and provide the resources that they need to be successful. Another important aspect is the desire we have to include more students—to find ways to invite students to participate and to attend our programs. I think those are the big responsibilities we have, and we do that under the direction of the Board of Education.

Alford: Could you share some of the feelings that the senior leaders of the Church have regarding the seminary and institute programs?

Webb: I don't want to speak for them, but every indication I get is that they are very appreciative of what's happening. They believe the seminary and institute programs are a wonderful blessing to the young people of the Church. They are very encouraging. When you think about what it takes to provide teachers, buildings, and resources to support these programs, it says a lot about the Brethren's feelings for the youth of the Church. The Church Board of Education is not a token board. They truly oversee the major decisions within our programs, and we do the best we can to carry out their direction and counsel.

It's a wonderful blessing to sit in meetings with the Executive Committee of the Board of Education. It's wonderful to watch them; they certainly lead and guide our programs. I think my appreciation for the fact that there is a prophet on the earth has grown. My testimony of living prophets continues to be strengthened, but more than anything, my appreciation that Heavenly Father would send priesthood keys to the earth and provide a prophet on the earth continues to grow.

Alford: What is the most rewarding part of your current assignment?

Webb: It's definitely the people I get to work with. It's really wonderful to go to work and be surrounded with people who are so firmly

rooted in the gospel, live with so much faith, and at the same time are so bright and capable. It's a wonderful balance of intellectual capacity and simple faith that is fun to watch. I love traveling and being with our teachers all over the world. I love seeing the students. It's wonderful to go into some small village in a remote part of the world to a daily seminary class and watch students with their scriptures talking about the gospel. I've been to countries where the Church is very new. I had an experience recently in a country where the Church has only been established for eleven years. During a fireside with a couple hundred seminary students, the seminary choir came up and sang "I Know That My Redeemer Lives"—this in a country that is not primarily Christian. I spoke with some of the seminary students after the fireside, and they told stories of how they recently joined the Church. They had just heard the name of Jesus Christ within the last year, and here they were bearing testimony of him through their music. Those are experiences I will treasure for a long time.

Alford: Where do the challenges lie right now?

Webb: I think it still comes back to the students. In what ways can we serve them better? How can we reach more of them? What can we do to bless their lives? The world is becoming a more complicated place. What can we do to help deepen their conversion and prepare them for the future? I believe that Heavenly Father has a mission for this generation, and we need to prepare them for the things that are coming so that they will have an opportunity to bless the world. Those are the things that I try to think about.

Alford: What are your thoughts regarding the Teaching Emphasis?

Webb: The Teaching Emphasis is an attempt to incorporate and emphasize those principles of learning that we believe will lead to deepened conversion—to help the gospel go from a young person's head to their heart. We're not saying that what we have done in the past was not right or that there's a new way of doing things. What we are suggesting is that we should continue to do all of the good things we've always done, as well as working to identify additional principles of learning that will deepen conversion, protect our students against the influences of the world, and prepare them for what the Lord is expecting of them.

The biggest change in our approach would probably come down to the role of the student. Is the student actively participating? Is the student discovering things? Are students talking about ways the gospel blesses their lives? Are they sharing their own experiences with gospel principles? Those kinds of experiences with the scriptures and with

their peers will help to take gospel principles into their hearts and will prepare them to be able to share it with others.

Alford: Would you share a favorite teaching experience?

Webb: Like any teacher who's ever taught seminary or institute, I have some wonderful memories of students who came in rather apathetic or maybe even a little rebellious and who changed over the course of time. Most times, it had nothing to do with me as the teacher, but it was a marvelous blessing to watch those changes occur.

In some ways, the best experiences in teaching are probably when I meet students several years later. It's just wonderful to have them come up and say, "Guess what I've done with my life!" That's the best part of teaching—to see how the gospel has blessed their life. I had an experience like that in an airport not too long ago. A former student approached me years after he had been in my class. He told me that when he was a junior in high school he had never learned to read. No one had known his secret because he had been able to hide it so well. He told me that while he was sitting in a seminary class, the Spirit had whispered to him, "You can learn to read if you get help." He went directly from class to his high school counselor and admitted that he couldn't read. The Spirit worked on him in a way that I couldn't. He got the help he needed and was able to learn to read. That one moment in class changed his life forever.

I am always amazed how the Holy Ghost can adapt an experience to meet personal needs. The best memories I have with teaching have been to watch the Holy Ghost fulfill his role in blessing individuals according to their needs.

Alford: It's not uncommon for new seminary and institute teachers, especially volunteer teachers, to feel overwhelmed when they first receive their calling. What advice would you give to newly called teachers?

Webb: I would remind them that Heavenly Father is in charge. He loves their students and wants to bless them. He cares about success in our classroom even more than we do. I would remind them of Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." Heavenly Father will make us more capable than we otherwise would be. His classroom is bigger than ours, and he's working on these young people and helping them, independent of us. If we'll do our part, he'll magnify us and allow us to be an instrument in blessing them.

In "The Charted Course," President J. Reuben Clark Jr. said our latitude and longitude is that we are to deepen faith and testimony in the Savior, Jesus Christ, in Joseph Smith, and in the Restoration. We

should measure everything that we try to accomplish in the seminary or institute classroom against that. We have to make a choice every day of what to teach, and then we have to make a choice of how we're going to teach it. Every day we should keep that in mind and say, "Will this learning activity or this way of teaching from the scriptures that I'm choosing deepen faith and testimony in the Savior and in the Restoration?" We should stay very focused on that as the outcome.

Sometimes we confuse the means with the end, and we get caught up in teaching methodology and other things. I recommend relaxing a bit and reminding ourselves that we're here to teach the scriptures in a way that will help our young people to deepen their faith and testimony. If we stay true to that, then we'll be on the right path. I would also encourage them to simply love their students. We're there to serve students. If we will love our students and teach them the gospel purely, Heavenly Father will magnify us, and we will do just fine.

Alford: Teachers sometimes feel frustrated because they feel they are not being effective. What thoughts can you share with teachers on that topic?

Webb: We cannot always recognize the effect we are having. Sometimes the results don't manifest themselves until years later. Think of Enos in the wilderness saying, "I started to think about what I was taught by my father, and it sunk deep into my heart." It isn't always while students are sitting in a seminary or institute classroom that the key experiences take place. We need to be patient and know that Heavenly Father is teaching these students beyond what we're able to do.

We play a role that we cannot always identify or measure, nor should we want to measure how much of the influence came from seminary. We get to play a part in adding drops to their lamps. I would say be patient and not worry too much if you can't put your finger on what you have done to make a difference in the life of a student.

Alford: As I look back to when I was a seminary student in the 1970s and compare it to today, I can see a marked change in the way the scriptures are used in gospel classrooms. What do you think that's doing for students today?

Webb: There was a time, not too long ago, when we did not teach sequentially from the scriptures. We taught conceptually and kind of supplemented lessons with the scriptures. Students would come to class not knowing whether or not they were going to use their scriptures in class that day. A generation ago, people seldom brought scriptures to church, and now it's rare to see anyone without them. The scriptures have become the central text from which we teach our courses. That's true in seminary and also in institute.

We would hope that no matter what the course of study is that students will still learn from the scriptures, because there is power in the word of God. There is power that comes from studying the scriptures and the words of living prophets that's different; it's different than any other way of teaching. It is central to our commission to teach the scriptures.

There is a difference between teaching the scriptures and teaching *about* the scriptures. Our students need to hear the prophets testify. If I wanted to help a young person who was considering going on a mission and I could have him sit down for twenty minutes with the Apostle Paul or with Ammon or one of the other great missionaries from the scriptures, I would be crazy not to give them that opportunity. Or if I want to help a young person repent, how wonderful it would be for them to have an interview with Alma the Younger or someone else in the scriptures who thoroughly understands that process. The scriptures provide those opportunities. Our students should hear the prophets speak to them and testify to them every day in our classrooms. We have to teach the scriptures.

Alford: What can seminary and institute teachers, volunteer as well as full-time teachers, do to strengthen communication channels with their local priesthood leaders?

Webb: I think the more we can align ourselves under the direction of priesthood keys, the more we will be able to bless the young people. That is the bottom line. So the advice I would give to people is to work closely with priesthood leaders and communicate the best we can. We are there to serve, to receive counsel, and to act the best we can under those priesthood keys. Gary Moore, my predecessor, uses the analogy of a dump truck, which I think is a good one. When a priesthood leader sees a seminary or institute teacher coming, do they see them as a dump truck coming to *unload* all of their problems, saying, "Here, Bishop, fix this"? Or are they coming to *take away* problems and to be part of the solution? I think it would be ideal if a priesthood leader sees us coming and says, "Oh good, here's some help." If they see us and think, "Oh, no. What problem are they going to give me now?" then we're serving them inappropriately.

Alford: What can parents do to help and support their children who are attending seminary and institute?

Webb: First, I would say that parents should know what their children are studying; know so that they can ask, "What are you learning in seminary?" Have those talks around the dinner table. We are trying to do some things with the Teaching Emphasis that will give students an

opportunity to explain gospel principles and share their experiences both in and out of the classroom. The more opportunities our young people have, even around the dinner table, to talk about gospel principles and explain in their own words what they've learned, or to teach a family home evening lesson, the better off they will be. To be able to express gospel principles is part of the experience we hope they are having.

We send a message to our children with everything that we do about how important we feel certain things are. If we ignore their participation in seminary or institute, we are sending a message that we think it's less important to us than other things. I wouldn't suggest that I can tell parents what to do, but I would ask them to stop and consider, "What message am I sending to my children about gospel study and about other things associated with the Church and their importance in my life by the way I talk about them and treat them?" I would also encourage parents to communicate with their local seminary and institute people. The more they get on the phone or go to parent-teacher conferences or do whatever they can to talk, the better off everyone is. I think increased communication blesses everyone involved.

Alford: Who has been the greatest influence on you and the way you teach?

Webb: Actually, I'd start with my parents. My dad was a public school teacher for many years, and I think he is a very good teacher. Also, he was a teacher in our home. Both of my parents love the gospel. They work hard and care about the right things. We talked a lot about the gospel around our dinner table. Mom would always come back from Education Week or something else and couldn't wait to tell us what she had learned. There was just that environment in our home that the gospel is wonderful, exciting, and fun to talk about. I think a lot of it started there.

I would hesitate to name any names in my experience with seminary and institute faculties because I'd leave people off the list. From the very beginning, principals, area directors, and other faculty have been wonderful. I have a long list of people who have taught and mentored me.

Alford: Who are your heroes?

Webb: Some of them are people in history whom I'd love to emulate. I also have people very close to me who are my heroes. Honestly, my wife is one of my heroes. She's one of the brightest people I know, and she's just so balanced and has so much wisdom and love for people.

My heroes are also the young people in the Church who, while living in a really difficult world, stand up for what's right. I can't name them by name, but in my mind I have pictures of young people in seminary classes bearing testimony and standing up to peer pressure and opposition. Anyone who will do the right thing, who will love and accept other people, who will serve other people, and who will try to follow the Savior—those people are my heroes.

Alford: Every seminary and institute teacher wants their students to feel the Spirit every day in class. What are your thoughts on this subject?

Webb: I think it starts with who we are—that we're living a life that qualifies us for the influence of the Holy Ghost. The more we speak of the Savior, the more the Holy Ghost is able to confirm what we teach. If we appropriately, carefully, and reverently talk about the Savior and testify of him, the more the Spirit will be present in our classrooms.

The Doctrine and Covenants teaches us that the Spirit will be given by the prayer of faith. We have to plead with Heavenly Father for the Spirit in our classroom before that gift will be given. Like every teacher, I've had the experience of having a first-hour class go really well and think, "Oh, I did better than I thought. I guess I'm pretty good at this one," and then the next class goes terribly. It's because we forgot that we have to ask for his help and rely on that help and not upon our own abilities. The Spirit is given as a gift; it's not something we can compel or force. We need to be careful and trust Heavenly Father that he will give his Spirit when he chooses.

We can certainly do some things, though, that can help create an environment conducive to the Holy Ghost. Part of it's in our relationships—the way we treat and respect our students. I think if we see them as children of God who are hungry and thirsty for the knowledge of what the scriptures have to offer, then I think we will teach them differently—more in a way that would invite the Spirit. Certainly if we teach from the scriptures, there's power in the scriptures that invites the Spirit. There's also power in testimony. The more we testify and the more often our students testify to each other, the more of an endowment of the Spirit will be in our classrooms.

Alford: What are some of the most important lessons that you have personally learned from teaching?

Webb: I have learned that Heavenly Father is involved in our lives. He cares about each one of us individually. He is patient and quick to forgive, and he gives second chances to people who are humble and willing to try. His ability to reach hearts and change people's lives far

exceeds our ability. I've seen absolute miracles that would not have happened if Heavenly Father had not intervened. I've learned to trust him and rely on him. It's his work, his gospel, his scriptures, and it's a privilege for us to be a small part in that.

Alford: How has the blessing of working in this great program strengthened your testimony of this latter-day work?

Webb: I can see Heavenly Father's hand involved in it. There are experiences that demonstrate that Heavenly Father is involved in every aspect of Church education. Teachers are certainly blessed by teaching; we probably learn more than our students. That has certainly been true for me. The opportunity to study the scriptures and to think about how to present them to someone else helps you understand the gospel better. What a blessing it is to be asked to do that every day. You cannot help but deepen your testimony of the gospel, of the promises, and of the covenants that he has given to us. My experiences have strengthened my testimony of and appreciation for Jesus Christ and his restored gospel. I know that it is true, and I am more grateful for the gospel in my life than I can express. **RE**